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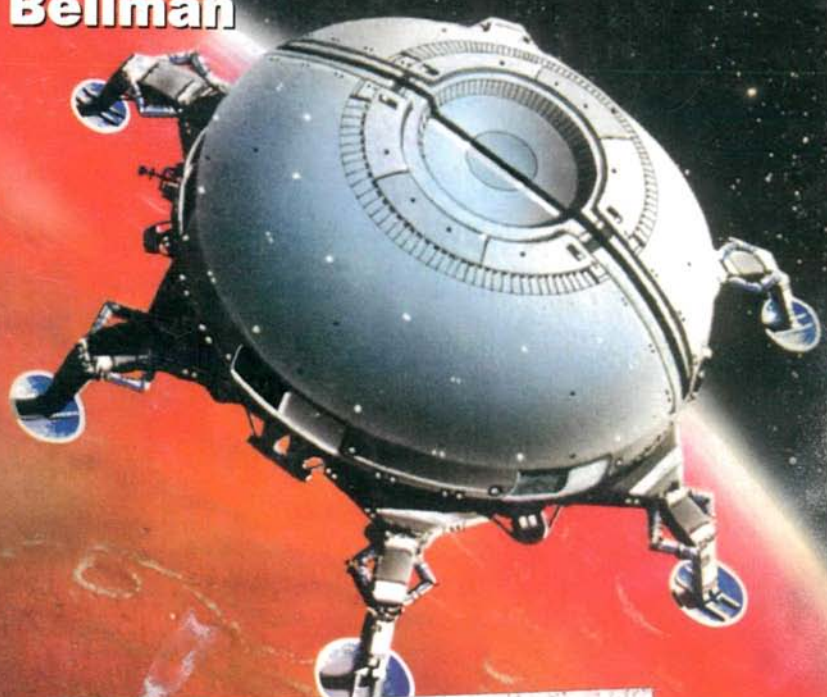
JUNE 2003

Murder on the Moon
John Varley
The Bellman



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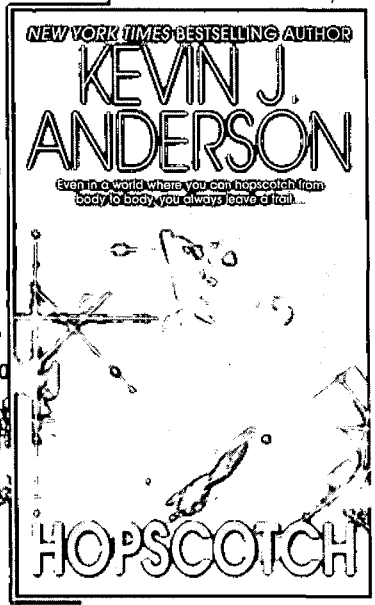
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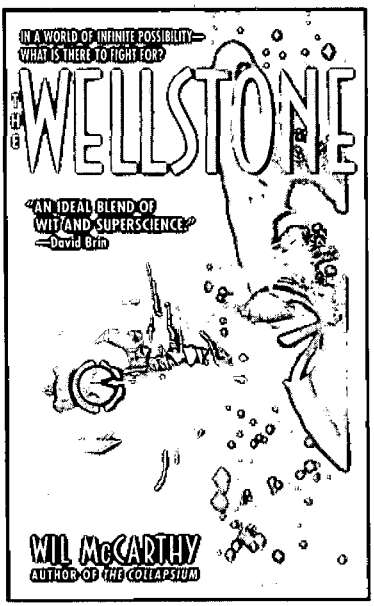
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Asimov's Science Fiction

JUNE 2003

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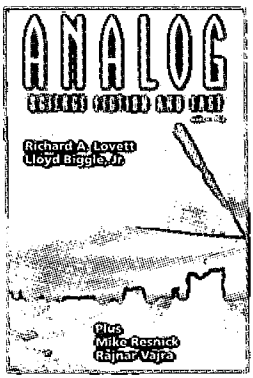

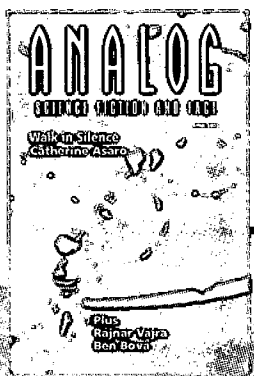

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE CONQUEST OF SPACE

I'm writing this just a couple of days after the Columbia shuttle disaster, which of course will be old news by the time this reaches print, the magazine production process being what it is. Before you get to read this, we will already have been through a long, dreary business of explanations, recriminations, Congressional inquiries, and demands for a rethinking of our entire space-exploration program. There will have been, I'm sure, a moratorium on further shuttle flights while all this work of inquiry is going on, and a general hold on all NASA projects will probably still be in effect when this piece is published.

The most profound short-range effect, surely, will be on the astronaut program. Even today, barely forty-eight hours after the shuttle exploded over Texas, the lead article in the *Wall Street Journal* bears the headline, "Shuttle Crash Raises Questions About Future of Manned Flights," and begins, "Why is America still sending men and women into space?"

I hope I'm simply preaching to the converted here when I reply that the answer to the *Journal*'s question, "Why?" is a simple "Why not?" A NASA flight controller quoted by the *Journal* gives a somewhat more elaborate answer: "The human race has been about exploration since it crawled out of the swamps on four legs. If you're not exploring, you're dying."

Makes sense to me, and probably to most of you, who wouldn't be reading science fiction if you didn't think the exploration of the cosmos was a worthwhile thing to do. But not to a substantial number of Americans who are asking, this morning, why we continue to risk precious human lives on something as remote from immediate everyday needs as trips into space, when robots and sensors could do the job just as well. (There are also, of course, plenty who are asking why we are bothering to spend money on space exploration at all, when there are so many dire problems still unsolved on Earth, etc., etc. A letter published today in the New York *Times* declares that the best possible outcome of the disaster would be the scrapping of the manned space program and the shifting of the billions of dollars thus saved to improving the science programs in our public schools. The best I can do in dealing with such remarks is to refer the anti-space people to the remarks of the NASA controller I quote above, and let them try to refute them. School science programs would not be well served by a curtailment of such a dramatic form of scientific research as the exploration of space.)

But this issue of risk—

We have become, it seems, a risk-averse nation. Last year's controversy over smallpox vaccination is a good example: until a generation ago, everyone was routinely vaccinated against smallpox in childhood, and, since smallpox thereby

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was driven from the world, vaccination was universally regarded as a Good Thing. Suddenly it has been made to seem terribly risky, and people are shrinking back in horror from the thought of submitting to it. Likewise, the expenditure of human lives even in the name of national defense is a controversial issue now, which is why we used local troops instead of our own when we were hunting Osama bin Laden in the mountains of Afghanistan in 2001, and why our earlier attempts at striking out at terrorist camps were conducted by high-flying planes and guided missiles instead of actual battalions of troops. We had scarcely any casualties in those various remote-control military campaigns, but also we accomplished very little of what we had hoped to achieve. Sometimes risk is necessary; sometimes lives have to be lost in the process of attaining important ends.

I don't like taking risks much, myself. I'm just a writer, not any kind of hero, and I wouldn't volunteer to take a ride in a space shuttle, any more than I'd like to be fighting in Iraq just now. (Isaac Asimov, for whom this magazine was named, wasn't much of a warrior either, and wouldn't even travel in an airplane.)

Spaceships weren't meant to be piloted by timid people like Isaac and me, nor are battles won by the likes of us. But there are plenty of braver people around—like the seven *Columbia* astronauts—who have a different attitude toward risk. And we should not bar their way.

It is necessary, naturally, to distinguish between sensible risks and stupid ones. One good reason why we don't send manned expeditions to Jupiter is that an expedition that landed on Jupiter would have a non-debatable 0 percent chance of survival: Jupiter is a huge ball of nasty gases, with a massive hard core underneath that exerts a gravitational pull of enormous intensity. Any manned landing on Jupiter would be, in al-Qaeda's fascinating phrase, "a martyrdom operation." Nor do we yet even contemplate sending a spaceship of human observers on an orbital voyage around Jupiter, because such information as we have gathered so far from three and a half decades of manned space exploration indicates that weightlessness for the period of several years such a voyage would require would have serious debilitating effects on the voyager's skeletal structure.

We do know, though, that manned voyages to Mars, where gravity and a lethal atmospheric blanket would not be problems, would be possible using existing technology. Nobody's talking about doing it, because NASA says the cost of such a mission would be upward of half a trillion dollars, but because we have kept astronauts aloft for periods of time approximating the length of a Mars voyage we know that humans could make the trip without suffering undue bodily harm. The astronauts who stayed up there for those long-term tests understood that risk was involved. But they stayed, and their bones did not turn to Jell-O during their months in space, and now we know. Their courage laid the foundation for the next phase—however far in the future it now lies—of manned space exploration.

Those astronauts saw what they were doing as a sensible risk, with much to gain from success and a reasonable probability of avoiding calamity. So did the ones who per-

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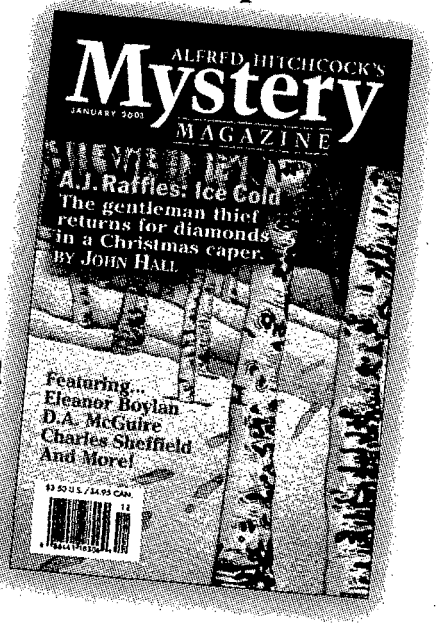

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ished in our two shuttle disasters. Discovery is *always* a gamble. Columbus made it back alive from his journey to the West Indies, but Magellan didn't survive his historic voyage of circumnavigation; Captain Cook also died at sea, but not before he, like Magellan, had ventured deep into unknown waters and vastly increased our understanding of our planet's southern hemisphere. Many another explorer took similar gambles and lost—but it was the rest of us who gained from their sacrifices.

If we look at the early history of aviation—the dawn of manned flight—we see a horrendous record of human casualties. Orville and Wilbur Wright were the first to fly a mechanically powered heavier-than-air vehicle, traveling 852 feet in 59 seconds and landing safely. That was in 1903. It was not until five years later that the first airplane fatality occurred, when Lieutenant Thomas Selfridge of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, flying as Orville Wright's passenger, was killed when a propeller malfunction caused the plane to crash. (Wright survived.) But then, as aviators began to attempt more elaborate exploits, the fatalities came thick and fast. In 1909 a French aviator, Eugene Lefebvre, was killed while flying a Wright plane. Edouard Nieuport, who designed the first workable single-wing plane, died in a plane crash in 1911; his brother Charles met the same fate in 1913. Charles Stewart Rolls, in 1910 the first aviator to make a round-trip flight across the English channel, died a month later while competing in an air race. George Chavez, who made the first flight over the Alps the same year, died as a result of injuries sustained while landing. John B. Moisant, who accomplished the first Paris-London flight in September, 1910, died a few months later while flying at New Orleans. Eugene Ely, who in 1910 took off from the deck of a cruiser anchored in the Atlantic and flew to land, and two months later set out from San Francisco and landed successfully on the deck of a battleship in the Pacific, thus making the first ship-to-shore and shore-to-ship flights, was killed in another flight soon after. Harriet Quimby, the first American woman pilot and the first woman to fly the English Channel, in 1912, died three months later while flying over Boston Harbor. And so on and so on—a lengthy tragic roster of pioneer mortality.

Since aviation was obviously so dangerous, it was banned by international treaty in 1913, right? Which is why American science fiction fans will have to make a five-day-long sea journey in 2005 if they want to get to the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, Scotland, and why you will take the train from Atlanta to Phoenix to visit your parents next Thanksgiving.

Were the early aviators crazy to take the risks they did? No. Were they enormously brave? Absolutely. The brave shuttle astronauts weren't crazy, either. They measured the risks against the rewards, and made a decision to go. (The odds were with them, too. We have had only two catastrophic failures in 113 shuttle flights. Going up in a rickety 1910 airplane was far riskier than that.)

The problem today is the national notion we have developed that Risk Is Bad, and, since space flight currently is a government monopoly and government officials don't like to upset the voters, we must

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now go through a vast therapeutic process of inquiry and reassurance before the dreadful risks of manned space travel can be allowed again. The aviators of 1910 were free to put their own lives on the line without taking public-opinion polls.

I know there are many who think we can continue our space program using nothing but robots and computers. "Manned space flights are more about capturing the public's imagination than science," one space historian has already said. "It's circus, it's just pure circus." Maybe so; but I don't think capturing the public's attention with romantic acts of bravery is always such a contemptible thing. Nor do I believe unmanned exploration is the right way to do the job. In the end, human perceptions, human decision-making, human descriptive abilities, are what will serve as the goads that get us out into the universe, not readouts from sensors, probes, and robot eyes.

Of course manned flight into space is going to get started again, sooner or later, once the current anguished debate dies down. (For one thing, the expensive international space station now up there can't function without humans aboard. Do we just write it off? For that matter, who's going to rescue the three astronauts currently living there?) Space flight will resume under NASA auspices after a time, or it will start up through private financing. (Or even that of some other country. What a nice public-relations coup for twenty-first-century China to put the first astronauts on Mars!) But how sad that the issue of continuing into space should arise at all, simply because seven brave explorers lost their lives. To shut down manned space flight because it is too risky would be to say that those seven died in vain. It's the first step in a path of de-evolution that will take us back to those swamps. ❍

CORRECTION

The March cover art was misattributed.
The cover was by Michael Carroll. We are sorry about the mix-up.

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Multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award winner John Varley is the author of such renowned SF novels and collections as *The Persistence of Vision* (1978), *Titan* (1979), *Wizard* (1980), *Picnic on Nearside* (1980), *Millennium* (1983), *Demon* (1984), *Blue Champagne* (1986), *Steel Beach* (1992), and *Red Thunder* (2003). Over the years, we've had a handful of fortunate opportunities to publish his powerful short fiction. These stories have included "Air Raid" (as by Herb Boem in our first issue—Spring 1977), the Hugo- and Nebula-winning "Press Enter" (May 1984), and the terrifying tale of "The Barbie Murders" (January/February 1978). Twenty-five years after her first adventure, the lunar cop who solved that mystery, Anna-Louise Bach, returns to our pages in pursuit of another horrifying criminal known as . . .

THE BELLMAN

John Varley

A word of warning: There are a few violent scenes in this story that may be disquieting to some.

The woman stumbled down the long corridor, too tired to run. She was tall, her feet were bare, and her clothes were torn. She was far advanced in pregnancy.

Through a haze of pain, she saw a familiar blue light. Airlock. There was no place left to go. She opened the door and stepped inside, shut it behind her.

She faced the outer door, the one that led to vacuum. Quickly, she undogged the four levers that secured it. Overhead, a warning tone began to sound quietly, rhythmically. The outer door was now held shut by the air pressure inside the lock, and the inner door could not be opened until the outer latches were secured.

She heard noises from the corridor, but knew she was safe. Any attempt to force the outer door would set off enough alarms to bring the police and air department.

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It was not until her ears popped that she realized her mistake. She started to scream, but it quickly died away with the last rush of air from her lungs. She continued to beat soundlessly on the metal walls for a time, until blood flowed from her mouth and nose. The blood bubbled.

As her eyes began to freeze, the outer door swung upward and she looked out on the lunar landscape. It was white and lovely in the sunlight, like the frost that soon coated her body.

Lieutenant Anna-Louise Bach seated herself in the diagnostic chair, leaned back, and put her feet in the stirrups. Doctor Erickson began inserting things into her. She looked away, studying the people in the waiting room through the glass wall to her left. She couldn't feel anything—which in itself was a disturbing sensation—but she didn't like the thought of all that hardware so close to her child.

He turned on the scanner and she faced the screen on her other side. Even after so long, she was not used to the sight of the inner walls of her uterus, the placenta, and the fetus. Everything seemed to throb, engorged with blood. It made her feel heavy, as though her hands and feet were too massive to lift; a different sensation entirely from the familiar heaviness of her breasts and belly.

And the child. Incredible that it could be hers. It didn't look like her at all. Just a standard squinch-faced, pink and puckered little ball. One tiny fist opened and shut. A leg kicked, and she felt the movement.

"Do you have a name for her yet?" the doctor asked.

"Joanna." She was sure he had asked that last week. He must be making conversation, she decided. It was unlikely he even recalled Bach's name.

"Nice," he said, distractedly, punching a note into his clipboard terminal. "Uh, I think we can work you in on Monday three weeks from now. That's two days before optimum, but the next free slot is six days after. Would that be convenient? You should be here at 0300 hours."

Bach sighed.

"I told you last time, I'm not coming in for the delivery. I'll take care of that myself."

"Now, uh . . . " he glanced at his terminal. "Anna, you know we don't recommend that. I know it's getting popular, but—"

"It's Ms. Bach to you, and I heard that speech last time. And I've read the statistics. I know it's no more dangerous to have the kid by myself than it is in this damn fishbowl. So would you give me the goddam midwife and let me out of here? My lunch break is almost over."

He started to say something, but Bach widened her eyes slightly and her nostrils flared. Few people gave her any trouble when she looked at them like that, especially when she was wearing her sidearm.

Erikson reached around her and fumbled in the hair at the nape of her neck. He found the terminal and removed the tiny midwife she had worn for the last six months. It was gold, and about the size of a pea. Its function was neural and hormonal regulation. Wearing it, she had been able to avoid morning sickness, hot flashes, and the possibility of miscarriage from the exertions of her job. Erikson put it in a small plastic box, and took out another that looked just like it.

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"This is the delivery midwife," he said, plugging it in. "It'll start labor at the right time, which in your case is the ninth of next month." He smiled, once again trying for a bedside manner. "That will make your daughter an Aquarius."

"I don't believe in astrology."

"I see. Well, keep the midwife in at all times. When your time comes, it will re-route your nerve impulses away from the pain centers in the brain. You'll experience the contractions in their full intensity, you see, but you won't perceive it as pain. Which, I'm told, makes all the difference. Of course, I wouldn't know."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't. Is there anything else I need to know, or can I go now?"

"I wish you'd reconsider," he said, peevishly. "You really should come into the natatorium. I must confess, I can't understand why so many women are choosing to go it alone these days."

Bach glanced around at the bright lights over the horde of women in the waiting room, the dozens sitting in examination alcoves, the glint of metal and the people in white coats rushing around with frowns on their faces. With each visit to this place the idea of her own bed, a pile of blankets, and a single candle looked better.

"Beats me," she said.

There was a jam on the Leystrasse feeder line, just before the carousel. Bach had to stand for fifteen minutes wedged in a tight mass of bodies, trying to protect her belly, listening to the shouts and screams ahead where the real crush was, feeling the sweat trickling down her sides. Someone near her was wearing shoes, and managed to step on her foot twice.

She arrived at the precinct station twenty minutes late, hurried through the rows of desks in the command center, and shut the door of her tiny office behind her. She had to turn sideways to get behind her desk, but she didn't mind that. Anything was worth it for that blessed door.

She had no sooner settled in her chair than she noticed a handwritten note on her desk, directing her to briefing room 330 at 1400 hours. She had five minutes.

One look around the briefing room gave her a queasy feeling of disorientation. Hadn't she just come from here? There were between two and three hundred officers seated in folding chairs. All were female, and visibly pregnant.

She spotted a familiar face, sidled awkwardly down a row, and sat beside Sergeant Inga Krupp. They touched palms.

"How's it with you?" Bach asked. She jerked her thumb toward Krupp's belly. "And how long?"

"Just fightin' gravity, trying not to let the entropy get me down. Two more weeks. How about you?"

"More like three. Girl or boy?"

"Girl."

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"Me, too." Bach squirmed on the hard chair. Sitting was no longer her favorite position. Not that standing was all that great. "What is this? Some kind of medical thing?"

Krupp spoke quietly, from the corner of her mouth. "Keep it under your suit. The crosstalk is that pregnancy leave is being cut back."

"And half the force walks off the job tomorrow." Bach knew when she was being put on. The union was far too powerful for any reduction in the one-year child-rearing sabbatical. "Come on, what have you heard?"

Krupp shrugged, then eased down in her chair. "Nobody's said. But I don't think it's medical. You notice you don't know most of the people here? They come from all over the city."

Bach didn't have time to reply, because Commissioner Andrus had entered the room. He stepped up to a small podium and waited for quiet. When he got it, he spent a few seconds looking from face to face.

"You're probably wondering why I called you all here today."

There was a ripple of laughter. Andrus smiled briefly, but quickly became serious again.

"First the disclaimer. You all know of the provision in your contract relating to hazardous duty and pregnancy. It is not the policy of this department to endanger civilians, and each of you is carrying a civilian. Participation in the project I will outline is purely voluntary; nothing will appear in your records if you choose not to volunteer. Those of you who wish to leave now may do so."

He looked down and tactfully shuffled papers while about a dozen women filed out. Bach shifted uncomfortably. There was no denying she would feel diminished personally if she left. Long tradition decreed that an officer took what assignments were offered. But she felt a responsibility to protect Joanna.

She decided she was sick to death of desk work. There would be no harm in hearing him out.

Andrus looked up and smiled bleakly. "Thank you. Frankly, I hadn't expected so many to stay. Nevertheless, the rest of you may opt out at any time." He gave his attention to the straightening of his papers by tapping the bottom edges on the podium. He was a tall, cadaverous man with a big nose and hollows under his cheekbones. He would have looked menacing, but his tiny mouth and chin spoiled the effect.

"Perhaps I should warn you before—"

But the show had already begun. On a big holo screen behind him a picture leaped into focus. There was a collective gasp, and the room seemed to chill for a moment. Bach had to look away, queasy for the first time since her rookie days. Two women got up and hurried from the room.

"I'm sorry," Andrus said, looking over his shoulder and frowning. "I'd meant to prepare you for that. But none of this is pretty."

Bach forced her eyes back to the picture.

One does not spend twelve years in the homicide division of a metropolitan police force without becoming accustomed to the sight of violent death. Bach had seen it all and thought herself unshockable, but she had not reckoned on what someone had done to the woman on the screen.

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The woman had been pregnant. Someone had performed an impromptu Caesarian section on her. She was opened up from the genitals to the breastbone. The incision was ragged, hacked in an irregular semi-circle with a large flap of skin and muscle pulled to one side. Loops of intestine bulged through ruptured fascial tissue, still looking wet in the harsh photographer's light.

She was frozen solid, posed on a metal autopsy table with her head and shoulders up, slumped against a wall that was no longer there. It caused her body to balance on its buttocks. Her legs were in an attitude of repose, yet lifted at a slight angle to the table.

Her skin was faint blue and shiny, like mother-of-pearl, and her chin and throat were caked with rusty brown frozen blood. Her eyes were open, and strangely peaceful. She gazed at a spot just over Bach's left shoulder.

All that was bad enough, as bad as any atrocity Bach had ever seen. But the single detail that had leaped to her attention was a tiny hand, severed, lying frozen in the red mouth of the wound.

"Her name was Elfreda Tong, age twenty-seven, a life-long resident of New Dresden. We have a biographical sheet you can read later. She was reported missing three days ago, but nothing was developed.

"Yesterday we found this. Her body was in an airlock in the west quadrant, map reference delta-omicron-sigma 97. This is a new section of town, as yet underpopulated. The corridor in question leads nowhere, though in time it will connect a new warren with the Cross-Crisium.

"She was killed by decompression, not by wounds. Use-tapes from the airlock service module reveal that she entered the lock alone, probably without a suit. She must have been pursued, else why would she have sought refuge in an airlock? In any case, she unsealed the outer door, knowing that the inner door could not then be moved." He sighed, and shook his head. "It might have worked, too, in an older lock. She had the misfortune to discover a design deficiency in the new-style locks, which are fitted with manual pressure controls on the corridor phone plates. It was simply never contemplated that anyone would want to enter a lock without a suit and unseal the outer door."

Bach shuddered. She could understand that thinking. In common with almost all Lunarians, she had a deep-seated fear of vacuum, impressed on her from her earliest days. Andrus went on.

"Pathology could not determine time of death, but computer records show a time line that might be significant. As those of you who work in homicide know, murder victims often disappear totally on Luna. They can be buried on the surface and never seen again. It would have been easy to do so in this case. Someone went to a lot of trouble to remove the fetus—for reasons we'll get to in a moment—and could have hidden the body fifty meters away. It's unlikely the crime would have been discovered.

"We theorize the murderer was rushed. Someone attempted to use the lock, found it not functioning because of the open outer door, and called repair service. The killer correctly assumed the frustrated citizen in the corridor would go to the next lock and return on the outside to determine

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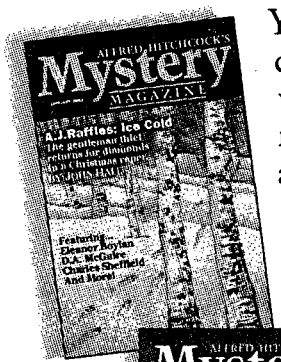

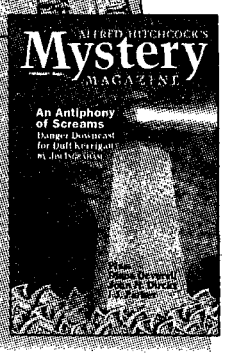

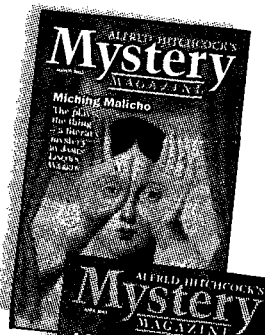

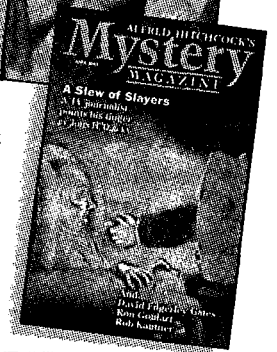

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the cause of the obstruction. Which he did, to find Elfreda as you see her now. As you can see," he pointed to a round object partially concealed in the wound, "the killer was in such haste that he or she failed to get the entire fetus. This is the child's head, and of course you can see her hand."

Andrus coughed nervously and turned from the picture. From the back of the room, a woman hurried for the door.

"We believe the killer to be insane. Doubtless this act makes sense according to some tortured pathology unique to this individual. Psychology section says the killer is probably male. Which does not rule out female suspects.

"This is disturbing enough, of course. But aside from the fact that this sort of behavior is rarely isolated—the killer is compelled eventually to repeat it—we believe that Ms. Tong is not the first. Analysis of missing persons reveals a shocking percentage of pregnant females over the last two years. It seems that someone is on the loose who preys on expectant mothers, and may already have killed between fifteen and twenty of them."

Andrus looked up and stared directly at Bach for a moment, then fixed his gaze on several more women in turn.

"You will have guessed by now that we intend using you as bait."

Being bait was something Bach had managed to avoid in twelve eventful years on the force. It was not something that was useful in homicide work, which was a gratifyingly straightforward job in a world of fuzzy moral perplexities. Undercover operations did not appeal to her.

But she wanted to catch this killer, and she could not think of any other way to do it.

"Even this method is not very satisfactory," she said, back in her office. She had called in Sergeants Lisa Babcock and Erich Steiner to work with her on the case. "All we really have is computer printouts on the habits and profiles of the missing women. No physical evidence was developed at the murder scene."

Sergeant Babcock crossed her legs, and there was a faint whirring sound. Bach glanced down. It had been a while since the two of them had worked together. She had forgotten about the bionic legs.

Babcock had lost her real ones to a gang who cut them off with a chain knife and left her to die. She didn't, and the bionic replacements were to have been temporary while new ones were grown. But she had liked them, pointing out that a lot of police work was still legwork, and these didn't get tired. She was a small brunette woman with a long face and lazy eyes, one of the best officers Bach had ever worked with.

Steiner was a good man, too, but Bach picked him over several other qualified candidates simply because of his body. She had lusted after him for a long time, bedded him once, thirty-six weeks before. He was Joanna's father, though he would never know it. He was also finely muscled, light brown, and hairless, three qualities Bach had never been able to resist.

"We'll be picking a place—taproom, sensorium, I don't know yet—and I'll start to frequent it. It'll take some time. He's not going to just jump out

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and grab a woman with a big belly. He'll probably try to lure her away to a safe place. Maybe feed her some kind of line. We've been studying the profiles of his victims—"

"You've decided the killer is male?" Babcock asked.

"No. They say it's likely. They're calling him 'The Bellman.' I don't know why."

"Lewis Carroll," Steiner said.

"Huh?"

Steiner made a wry face. "From 'The Hunting of the Snark.' But it was the snark that made people 'softly and suddenly vanish away,' not the Bellman. He *hunted* the snark."

Bach shrugged. "It won't be the first time we've screwed up a literary reference. Anyway, that's the code for this project: BELLMANXXX. Top security access." She tossed copies of bound computer printout at each of them. "Read this, and tell me your thoughts tomorrow. How long will it take you to get your current work squared away?"

"I could clear it up in an hour," Babcock said.

"I'll need a little more time."

"Okay. Get to work on it right now." Steiner stood and edged around the door, and Bach followed Babcock into the noisy command center.

"When I get done, how about knocking off early?" Babcock suggested. "We could start looking for a spot to set this up."

"Fine. I'll treat you to dinner."

Hobson's Choice led a Jekyll and Hyde existence: a quiet and rather staid taproom by day, at night transformed by hologrammatic projection into the fastest fleshparlor in the East 380's. Bach and Babcock were interested in it because it fell midway between the posh establishments down at the Bedrock and the sleazy joints that dotted the Upper Concourses. It was on the sixtieth level, at the intersection of the Midtown Arterial slides, the Heidlelburg Senkrechtstrasse lifts, and the shopping arcade that lined 387strasse. Half a sector had been torn out to make a parkcube, lined by sidewalk restaurants.

They were there now, sitting at a plastwood table waiting for their orders to arrive. Bach lit a cheroot, exhaled a thin cloud of lavender smoke, and looked at Babcock.

"What do you make of it?"

Babcock looked up from the printouts. She frowned, and her eyes lost their focus. Bach waited. Babcock was slow, but not stupid. She was methodical.

"Victims lower middle class to poor. Five out of work, seven on welfare."

"*Possible* victims," Bach emphasized.

"Okay. But some of them had better be victims, or we're not going to get anywhere. The only reason we're looking for the Bellman in these lower-middle-class taprooms is that it's something these women had in common. They were all lonely, according to the profiles."

Bach frowned. She didn't trust computer profiles. The information in the profiles was of two types: physical and psychological. The psych portion included school records, doctor visits, job data, and monitored con-

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versations, all tossed together and developed into what amounted to a psychoanalysis. It was reliable, to a point.

Physical data was registered every time a citizen passed through a pressure door, traveled on a slideway or tube, spent money, or entered or left a locked room; in short, every time the citizen used an identiplate. Theoretically, the computers could construct a model showing where each citizen had gone on any day.

In practice, of course, it didn't work that way. After all, criminals owned computers, too.

"Only two of them had steady lovers," Babcock was saying. "Oddly, both of the lovers were women. And of the others, there seems to be a slight preference for homosex."

"Means nothing," Bach said.

"I don't know. There's also a predominance of male fetuses among the missing. Sixty percent."

Bach thought about it. "Are you suggesting these women didn't want the babies?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm just curious."

The waiter arrived with their orders, and the Bellman was shelved while they ate.

"How is that stuff?" Babcock asked.

"This?" Bach paused to swallow, and regarded her plate judiciously. "It's okay. About what you'd expect at the price." She had ordered a tossed salad, steakplant and baked potato, and a stein of beer. The steakplant had a faint metallic taste, and was overdone. "How's yours?"

"Passable," Babcock lisped around a mouthful. "Have you ever had real meat?"

Bach did not quite choke, but it was a close thing.

"No. And the idea makes me a little sick."

"I have," Babcock said.

Bach eyed her suspiciously, then nodded. "That's right. You emigrated from Earth, didn't you?"

"My family did. I was only nine at the time." She toyed with her beer mug. "Pa was a closet carnivore. Every Christmas he got a chicken and cooked it. Saved money for it most of the year."

"I'll bet he was shocked when he got up here."

"Maybe, a little. Oh, he knew there wasn't any black market meat up here. Hell, it was rare enough down there."

"What . . . what's a chicken?"

Babcock laughed. "Sort of a bird. I never saw one alive. And I never really liked it that much, either. I like steak better."

Bach thought it was perverted, but was fascinated anyway.

"What sort of steak?"

"From an animal called a cow. We only had it once."

"What did it taste like?"

Babcock reached over and speared the bite Bach had just carved. She popped it into her mouth.

"A lot like that. A little different. They never get the taste just right, you know?"

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Bach didn't know—had not even realized that her steakplant was supposed to taste like cow—and felt they'd talked about it enough, especially at mealtime.

They returned to Hobson's that night. Bach was at the bar and saw Steiner and Babcock enter. They took a table across the dance floor from her. They were nude, faces elaborately painted, bodies shaved and oiled.

Bach was dressed in a manner she had avoided for eight months, in a blue lace maternity gown. It reached to her ankles and buttoned around her neck, covering everything but her protruding belly. There was one other woman dressed as she was, but in pink, and with a much smaller bulge. Between the two of them, they wore more clothing than everyone else in Hobson's put together.

Lunarians tended to dress lightly if at all, and what was covered was a matter of personal choice. But in fleshparlors it was what was uncovered that was important, and how it was emphasized and displayed. Bach didn't care for the places much. There was an air of desperation to them.

She was supposed to look forlorn. Damn it, if she'd wanted to act, she would have made a career on the stage. She brooded about her role as bait, considered calling the whole thing off.

"Very good. You look perfectly miserable."

She glanced up to see Babcock wink as she followed Steiner onto the dance floor. She almost smiled. All right, now she had a handle on it. Just think about the stinking job, all the things she'd rather be doing, and her face would take care of itself.

"Hey there!"

She knew instantly she'd hate him. He was on the stool next to her, his bulging pectorals glistening in the violet light. He had even, white teeth, a profile like a hatchet, and a candy-striped penis with a gold bell hanging from the pierced foreskin.

"I'm not feeling musically inclined," she said.

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

Bach wished she knew.

"It's definitely the wrong sort of place," Babcock said, her eyes unfocused and staring at Bach's ceiling.

"That's the best news I've heard in months," Steiner said. There were dark circles under his eyes. It had been a strenuous night.

Bach waved him to silence and waited for Babcock to go on. For some reason, she had begun to feel that Babcock knew something about the Bellman, though she might not know she knew it. She rubbed her forehead and wondered if that made any sense.

The fact remained that when Babcock had said to wear blue instead of pink, Bach had done so. When she said to look lonely and in despair, Bach had done her best. Now she said Hobson's was wrong. Bach waited.

"I don't care if the computers say they spent their time in places like that," she said. "They probably did, but not toward the end. They would have wanted something quieter. For one thing, you don't take somebody home from a place like Hobson's. You fuck them on the dance floor." Stein-

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er moaned, and Babcock grinned at him. "Remember, it was in the line of duty, Erich."

"Don't get me wrong," Steiner said. "You're delightful. But all night long? And my *feet* hurt."

"But why a quieter place?" Bach asked.

"I'm not sure. The depressive personalities. It's hard to cope with Hobson's when you're depressed. They went there for uncomplicated fucking. But when they got really blue they went looking for a friend. And the Bellman would want a place where he could hope to take someone home. People won't take someone home unless they're getting serious."

That made sense to Bach. It followed the pattern of her own upbringing. In the crowded environment of Luna it was important to keep a space for yourself, a place you invited only special friends.

"So you think he made friends with them first."

"Again, I'm only speculating. Okay, look. None of them had any close friends. Most of them had boy fetuses, but they were homosexual. It was too late to abort. They're not sure they want the kids, they got into it in the first place because the idea of a kid sounded nice, but now they don't think they want a son. The decision is to keep it or give it to the state. They need someone to talk to." She let it hang there, looking at Bach.

It was all pretty tenuous, but what else was there to go on? And it wouldn't hurt to find another spot. It would probably help her nerves, not to mention Steiner's.

"Just the place for a snark," Steiner said.

"Is it?" Bach asked, studying the façade of the place and failing to notice Steiner's sarcasm.

Maybe it was the place to find the Bellman, she decided, but it didn't look too different from fifteen other places the team had haunted in three weeks.

It was called The Gong, for reasons that were not apparent. It was an out-of-the-way taproom on 511strasse, level seventy-three. Steiner and Babcock went in and Bach walked twice around the block to be sure she was not associated with them, then entered.

The lighting was subdued without making her wish for a flashlight. Only beer was served. There were booths, a long wooden bar with a brass rail and swiveling chairs, and a piano in one corner where a small, dark-haired woman was taking requests. The atmosphere was very twentieth-century, a little too quaint. She found a seat at one end of the bar.

Three hours passed.

Bach took it stoically. The first week had nearly driven her out of her mind. Now she seemed to have developed a facility for staring into space, or studying her reflection in the bar mirror, leaving her mind a blank.

But tonight was to be the last night. In a few hours she would lock herself in her apartment, light a candle beside her bed, and not come out until she was a mother.

"You look like you've lost your best friend. Can I buy you a drink?"

If I had a tenth-mark for every time I've heard that, Bach thought, but said, "Suit yourself."

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He jingled as he sat, and Bach glanced down, then quickly up to his face. It was not the same man she had met on the first night at Hobson's. Genital bells had become the overnight sensation, bigger than pubic gardening had been three years before, when everyone ran around with tiny flowers growing in their crotches. When men wore the bells they were called dong-a-lings, or, with even more cloying cuteness, ding-a-lingams.

"If you ask me to ring your bell," Bach said, conversationally, "I'll bust your balls."

"Who, me?" he asked, innocently. "Farthest thing from my mind. Honest."

She knew it had been on his lips, but he was smiling so ingenuously she had to smile back. He put out his palm, and she pressed it.

"Louise Brecht," she said.

"I'm Ernst Freeman."

But he was not, not really, and it surprised Bach, and saddened her. He was by far the nicest man she had talked to in the last three weeks. She allowed him to coax out her make-believe life history, the one Babcock had written the second day, and he really seemed to care. Bach found she almost believed the story herself, her sense of frustration giving a verisimilitude to Louise Brecht's crashingly boring life that Bach had never really achieved before.

So it was a shock when she saw Babcock walk behind her on her way to the toilet.

Babcock and Steiner had not been idle during the twenty minutes she had been talking to "Freeman." A microphone hidden in Bach's clothing enabled them to hear the conversation, while Steiner operated a tiny television camera. The results were fed to a computer, which used voiceprint and photo analysis to produce a positive ident. If the result didn't match, Babcock was to leave a note to that effect in the toilet. Which she was presumably doing now.

Bach saw her go back to the table and sit down, then caught her eye in the mirror. Babcock nodded slightly, and Bach felt goose pimples break out. This might not be the Bellman—he could be working any of a number of cons, or have something else in mind for her—but it was the first real break for the team.

She waited a decent interval, finishing a beer, then excused herself, saying she would be right back. She walked to the rear of the bar and through a curtain.

She pushed through the first door she saw, having been in so many taprooms lately that she felt she could have found the toilet with her feet shackled in a blackout. And indeed it seemed to be the right place. It was twentieth century design, with ceramic washbasins, urinals, and commodes, the latter discreetly hidden in metal stalls. But a quick search failed to produce the expected note. Frowning, she pushed back out through the swinging door, and nearly bumped into the piano player, who had been on her way in.

"Excuse me," Bach murmured, and looked at the door. It said "Men."

"Peculiarity of The Gong," the piano player said. "Twentieth century, remember? They were segregated."

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"Of course. Silly of me."

The correct door was across the hall, plainly marked "Women." Bach went in, found the note taped to the inside of one of the stall doors. It was the product of the tiny faxprinter Babcock carried in her purse, and crammed a lot of fine print onto an eight-by-twelve millimeter sheet.

She opened her maternity dress, sat down, and began to read.

His real, registered name was Bigfucker Jones. With a handle like that, Bach was not surprised that he used aliases. But the name had been of his own choosing. He had been born Ellen Miller, on Earth. Miller had been black, and her race and sex changes had been an attempt to lose a criminal record and evade the police. Both Miller and Jones had been involved in everything from robbery to meatlegging to murder. He had served several terms, including a transportation to the penal colony in Copernicus. When his term was up, he had elected to stay on Luna.

Which meant nothing as far as the Bellman was concerned. She had been hoping for some sort of sexual perversion record, which would have jibed more closely with the profile on the Bellman. For Jones to be the Bellman, there should have been money involved.

It was not until Bach saw the piano player's red shoes under the toilet stall door that something that had been nagging at her came to the surface. Why had she been going into the males-only toilet? Then something was tossed under the door, and there was a bright purple flash.

Bach began to laugh. She stood up, fastening her buttons.

"Oh, no," she said, between giggles. "That's not going to work on *me*. I always wondered what it'd be like to have somebody throw a flashball at me." She opened the stall door. The piano player was there, just putting her protective goggles back in her pocket.

"You must read too many cheap thriller novels," Bach told her, still laughing. "Don't you know those things are out of date?"

The woman shrugged, spreading her hands with a rueful expression. "I just do what I'm told."

Bach made a long face, then burst out laughing again.

"But you should know a flashball doesn't work unless you slip the victim the primer drug beforehand."

"The beer?" the woman suggested, helpfully.

"Oh, wow! You mean you . . . and, and that guy with the comic-book name . . . oh, wow!" She couldn't help it, she just had to laugh aloud again. In a way, she felt sorry for the woman. "Well, what can I tell you? It didn't work. The warranty must have expired, or something." She was about to tell the woman she was under arrest, but somehow she didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Back to the old drawing board, I guess," the woman said. "Oh, yeah, while I've got you here, I'd like for you to go to the West 500th tube station, one level up. Take this paper with you, and punch this destination. As you punch each number, forget it. When you've done that, swallow the paper. You have all that?"

Bach frowned at the paper. "West 500th, forget the number, eat the paper." She sighed. "Well, I guess I can handle that. But hey, you gotta re-

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member I'm doing this just as a favor to you. Just as soon as I get back, I'm going to—"

"Okay, okay. Just do it. Exactly as I said. I know you're humoring me, but let's just pretend the flashball worked, okay?"

It seemed like a reasonable enough suggestion. It was just the break Bach needed. Obviously, this woman and Jones were connected with the Bellman, whoever he or she was. Here was Bach's big chance to catch him. Of course, she was not going to forget the number.

She was about to warn the woman she would be arrested as soon as she returned from the address, but she was interrupted again.

"Go out the back door. And don't waste any time. Don't listen to anything anyone else says until someone says 'I tell you three times.' Then you can pretend the game is over."

"All right." Bach was excited at the prospect. Here at last was the sort of high adventure that everyone thought was a big part of police work. Actually, as Bach knew well, police work was dull as muzak.

"And I'll take that robe."

Bach handed it to her, and hurried out the back door wearing nothing but a big grin.

It was astonishing. One by one she punched in the numbers, and one by one they vanished from her mind. She was left with a piece of paper that might have been printed in Swahili.

"What do you know," she said to herself, alone in the two-seat capsule. She laughed, crumpled the paper, and popped it into her mouth, just like a spy.

She had no idea where she might be. The capsule had shunted around for almost half an hour, and come to rest in a private tube station just like thousands of others. There had been a man on hand for her arrival. She smiled at him.

"Are you the one I'm supposed to see?" she asked.

He said something, but it was gibberish. He frowned when it became clear she didn't understand him. It took her a moment to see what the problem was.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not supposed to listen to anyone." She shrugged, helplessly. "I had no idea it would work so well."

He began gesturing with something in his hands, and her brow furrowed, then she grinned widely.

"Charades? Okay. Sounds like . . ." But he kept waving the object at her. It was a pair of handcuffs.

"Oh, all right. If it'll make you happy." She held out her wrists, close together, and he snapped them on.

"I tell you three times," he said.

Bach began to scream.

It took hours to put her mind back together. For the longest time she could do nothing but shake and whimper and puke. Gradually she became aware of her surroundings. She was in a stripped apartment

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room, lying on a bare floor. The place smelled of urine and vomit and fear.

She lifted her head cautiously. There were red streaks on the walls, some of them bright and new, others almost brown. She tried to sit up, and winced. Her fingertips were raw and bloody.

She tried the door first, but it didn't even have an interior handle. She probed around the cracks, biting her tongue when the pain became too great in her shackled hands, satisfied herself that it could not be opened. She sat down again and considered her situation. It did not look promising, but she made her preparations to do what she could.

It might have been two hours before the door opened. She had no way to tell. It was the same man, this time accompanied by an unfamiliar woman. They both stood back and let the door swing inward, wary of an ambush. Bach cowered in the far corner, and as they approached she began to scream again.

Something gleamed in the man's hand. It was a chain knife. The rubber grip containing the battery nestled in his palm and the blunt, fifteen-centimeter blade pointed out, rimmed with hundreds of tiny teeth. The man squeezed the grip, and the knife emitted a high whine as the chain blurred into motion. Bach screamed louder, and got to her feet, backed against the wall. Her whole posture betrayed defenselessness, and evidently they fell for it just enough because when she kicked at the man's throat his answering slash was a little bit too late, missing her leg, and he didn't get another try. He hit the floor, coughing blood. Bach grabbed the knife as it fell.

The woman was unarmed, and she made the right decision, but again it was too late. She started toward the door, but tripped over Bach's outstretched leg and went down on her face.

Bach was going to kick her until she died, but all the activity had strained muscles that should not have been used so roughly; a cramp nearly doubled her over and she fell, arms out to break her fall and protect her stomach. Her manacled hands were going to hit the woman's arm and Bach didn't dare let go of the knife, nor did she dare take the fall on her abused fingertips, and while she agonized over what to do in that long second while she fell in the dreamy lunar gravity her fists hit the floor just behind the woman's arm.

There was an almost inaudible buzzing sound. A fine spray of blood hit Bach's arm and shoulder, and the wall three meters across the room. And the woman's arm fell off.

Both of them stared at it for a moment. The woman's eyes registered astonishment as she looked over to Bach.

"There's no pain," she said, distinctly. Then she started to get up, forgetting about the arm that was no longer there, and fell over. She struggled for a while like an overturned turtle while the blood spurted and she turned very white, then she was still.

Bach got up awkwardly, her breath coming in quick gasps. She stood for a moment, getting herself under control.

The man was still alive, and his breathing was a lot worse than Bach's. She looked down at him. It seemed he might live. She looked at the chain

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knife in her hand, then knelt beside him, touched the tip of the blade to the side of his neck. When she stood up, it was certain that he would never again cut a child from a mother's body.

She hurried to the door and looked carefully left and right. No one was there. Apparently her screams had not been anything remarkable, or she had killed everyone involved.

She was fifty meters down the corridor before the labor pains began.

She didn't know where she was, but could tell it was not anywhere near where Elfreda Tong had met her death. This was an old part of town, mostly industrial, possibly up close to the surface. She kept trying doors, hoping to find a way into the public corridors where she would have a chance to make a phone call. But the doors that would open led to storerooms, while the ones that might have been offices were locked up for the night.

Finally one office door came open. She looked in, saw it led nowhere. She was about to close the door and resume her flight when she saw the telephone.

Her stomach muscles knotted again as she knelt behind the desk and punched BELLMANXXX. The screen came to life, and she hastily thumbed the switch to blacken it.

"Identify yourself, please."

"This is Lieutenant Bach, I've got a Code One, officer in trouble. I need you to trace this call and send me some help, and I need it quick."

"Anna, where are you?"

"Lisa?" She couldn't believe it was Babcock.

"Yes. I'm down at headquarters. We've been hoping you'd find a way to report in. Where do we go?"

"That's just it. I don't know. They used a flashball on me and made me forget where I went. And—"

"Yes, we know all that. Now. After you didn't show up for a couple of minutes, we checked, and you were gone. So we arrested everyone in the place. We got Jones and the piano player."

"Then get *her* to tell you where I am."

"We already used her up, I'm afraid. Died under questioning. I don't think she knew, anyway. Whoever she worked for is very careful. As soon as we got the pentothal in her veins, her head blew itself all over the interrogation room. She was a junkie, we know that. We're being more careful with the man, but he knows even less than she did."

"Great."

"But you've got to get away from there, Lieutenant. It's terrible. You're in . . . shit, you know that." Babcock couldn't seem to go on for a moment, and when she did speak, her voice was shaking. "They're meatleggers, Anna. God help me, that's come to Luna now, too."

Bach's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"They procure meat for carnivores, goddam it. Flesh junkies. People who are determined to eat meat, and will pay any price."

"You're not trying to tell me . . ."

"Why the hell not?" Babcock flared. "Just look at it. On Earth there are

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still places you can raise animals, if you're careful. But here, we've got everything locked up so tight nobody dares try it. Somebody smells them, or the sewage monitors pick up traces of animal waste. Can't be done."

"Then why. . . ?"

"So what kind of meat's available?" Babcock went on, remorselessly. "There's tons of it on the hoof, all around you. You don't have to raise it or hide it. You just harvest it when you have a customer."

"But cannibalism?" Bach said, faintly.

"Why not? Meat's meat, to someone who wants it. They sell human meat on Earth, too, and charge a high price because it's supposed to taste . . . ah. I think I'm going to be sick."

"Me, too." Bach felt another spasm in her stomach. "Uh, how about that trace? Have you found me yet?"

"Still proceeding. Seems to be some trouble."

Bach felt a chill. She had not expected that, but there was nothing to do but wait. Surely the computers would get through in time.

"Lisa. Babies? They want *babies?*"

Babcock sighed. "I don't understand it, either. If you see the Bellman, why don't you ask him? We know they trade in adults, too, if it makes you feel any better."

"Lisa, my baby's on her way."

"Dear God."

Several times in the next quarter hour Bach heard running feet. Once the door opened and someone stuck his head in, glanced around, and failed to see Bach behind the desk with one hand covering the ready light on the phone and the other gripping the chain knife. She used the time to saw through the metal band of her handcuffs with the knife. It only took a moment; those tiny razors were sharp.

Every few minutes Babcock would come back on the line with a comment like "We're getting routed through every two-mark enclave in Luna." That told Bach that the phone she was using was protected with anti-tracer devices. It was out of her hands now. The two computers—the Bellman's and Babcock's—were matching wits, and her labor pains were coming every five minutes.

"Run!" Babcock shouted. "Get out of there, quick!"

Bach struggled to ignore the constriction in her gut, fought off fogginess. She just wanted to relax and give birth. Couldn't a person find any peace, anywhere?

"What? What happened?"

"Somebody at your end figured out that you might be using a phone. They know which one you're using, and they'll be there any second. Get out, quick!"

Bach got to her feet and looked out the door. Nothing. No sounds, no movement. Left or right?

It didn't seem to matter. She doubled over, holding her belly, and shuffled down the corridor.

At last, something different.

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The door was marked FARM: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. PRESSURE SUIT AREA. Behind it was corn, corn growing on eight-meter-high stalks, corn in endless rows and files that made dizzying vanishing points in the distance. Sunlight beat down through a clear plastic bubble—the harsh, white sunlight of Luna.

In ten minutes she was lost. At the same time, she knew where she was. If only she could get back to the phone, but it was surely under guard by now.

Discovering her location had been easy. She had picked one of the golden ears, long as her arm and fat as her thigh, peeled back the shuck, and there, on each thumb-sized yellow kernel was the trademark: a green discoloration in the shape of a laughing man with his arms folded across his chest. So she was in the Lunafood plantation. Oddly, it was only five levels above the precinct house, but it might as well have been a billion kilometers.

Being lost in the cornstalks didn't seem like such a bad idea just now. She hobbled down the rows as long as she could stay on her feet. Every step away from the walls should make the search that much more difficult. But her breathing was coming in huge gasps now, and she had the squeasy urge to hold her hands tightly against her crotch.

It didn't hurt. The midwife was working, so while she was in the grip of the most intense sensations she had ever imagined, nothing hurt at all. But it could not be ignored, and her body did not want to keep moving. It wanted to lie down and give up. She wouldn't let it.

One foot in front of the other. Her bare feet were caked in mud. It was drier on the rows of mounds where the corn grew; she tried to stay on them, hoping to minimize her trail.

Hot. It must have been over fifty degrees, with high humidity. A steam bath. Sweat poured from her body. She watched it drip from her nose and chin as she plodded on.

Her universe narrowed to only two things: the sight of her feet moving mechanically in and out of her narrowed vision, and the band of tightness in her gut.

Then her feet were no longer visible. She worried over it for a moment, wondering where they had gone. In fact, nothing was visible at all.

She rolled over onto her back and spit out dirt. A stalk of corn had snapped off at the base when she tumbled into it. She had a clear view upward of the dome, a catwalk hanging below it, and about a dozen golden tassels far overhead, drooping languidly in the still air. It was pretty, the view from down here. The corn tassels all huddled close to the black patch of sky, with green stalks radiating away in all directions. It looked like a good place to stay. She never wanted to get up again.

And this time it hurt some, despite the midwife. She moaned, grabbed the fallen cornstalk in both hands, and gritted her teeth. When she opened her eyes again, the stalk was snapped in two.

Joanna was here.

Bach's eyes bulged in amazement and her mouth hung open. Something was moving down through her body, something far too large to be a baby, something that was surely going to split her wide open.

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She relaxed for just a moment, breathing shallowly, not thinking of anything, and her hands went down over her belly. There was a round wet thing emerging from her. She felt its shape, found tiny hollows on the underside. How utterly amazing.

She smiled for the first time in a million years, and bore down. Her heels dug into the sod, then her toes, and her hips lifted from the black dirt. It was moving again. *She* was moving again. Joanna, Joanna, *Joanna* was being born.

It was over so quickly she gasped in surprise. Wet slithering, and her child fell away from her and into the dirt. Bach rolled to her side and pressed her forehead to the ground. The child nestled in blood and wetness between her legs.

She did what had to be done. When it came time to cut the cord, her hand automatically went to the chain knife. She stopped, seeing a man's threatening hand, hearing an almost supersonic whir that would in seconds disembowel her and rip Joanna away.

She dropped the knife, leaned over, and bit down hard.

Handfuls of corn silk pressed between her legs eventually stopped the bleeding. The placenta arrived. She was weak and shaky and would have liked nothing better than to just lie there in the mothering soil and heat.

But there was a shout from above. A man was up there, leaning over the edge of the catwalk. Answering shouts came from all around her. Far down at the end of her row, almost at the vanishing point, a tiny figure appeared and started coming toward her.

She had not thought she could get up, but she did. There seemed little point in running, but she ran, holding the chain knife in one hand and hugging Joanna in the other. If they would only come up to her and fight, she would die on a heap of slashed bodies.

A green finger of light sizzled into the ground at her heels. She instantly crossed into an adjacent row. So much for hand to hand combat.

The running was harder now, going over the hills rather than between them. But the man behind her could not keep her in view long enough for another shot.

Yet she had known it couldn't last. Vast as the corn plantation was, she could now see the end of it. She came out onto the ten-meter strip of bare ground between the corn plants and the edge of the dome.

There was a four-meter wall of bare metal in front of her. On top of the wall was the beginning of the clear material of the dome. It was shaped and anchored by a network of thin cables attached to the top of the wall on the outside.

It seemed there was no place to run, until she spotted the familiar blue light.

Inner door latches shut, outer ones open. Bach quickly did what Tong had done, but knew she had a better chance, if only for a while. This was an old lock, without an outside override. They would have to disconnect the alarms inside, then burn through the door. That would take some time.

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Only after she had assured herself that she was not vulnerable to a depressurize command from the outside—a possibility she had not thought about before, but which she could negate by opening one of the four inner door latches, thus engaging the safety overrides—only then did she look around the inside of the lock.

It was a five-person model, designed to pass work gangs. There was a toolbox on the floor, coils of nylon rope in one corner. And a closet built into the wall.

She opened it and found the pressure suit.

It was a large one, but Bach was a large woman. She struggled with adjustment straps until she had the middle let out enough to take both her and Joanna.

Her mind worked furiously, fighting through the exhaustion.

Why was the suit here?

She couldn't find an answer at first, then recalled that the man who had shot at her had not been wearing a suit, nor had the man on the catwalk. There were others chasing her that she hadn't seen, and she was willing to bet they didn't have suits on, either.

So the posted sign she had passed was a safety regulation that was widely ignored. Everyone knew that air conservation and safety regs were many times more stringent than they had to be. The farm had a plastic dome that was the only surface separating it from vacuum, and that automatically classified it as a vacuum-hazard area. But in reality it was safe to enter it without a pressure suit.

The suit was kept there for the rare occasions when it was necessary for someone to go outside. It was a large suit so it would fit anyone who happened to need it, with adjustment.

Interesting.

Joanna cried for the first time when Bach got the suit sealed. And no wonder. The child was held against her body, but there was no other support for her. She quickly got both tiny legs jammed down one of the suit legs, and that couldn't have been too comfortable. Bach tried her best to ignore it, at the same time noting how hard it was to resist the impulse to try and touch her with her hands. She faced the lock controls.

There was a manual evacuation valve. She turned it slowly, opening it a crack so the air would bleed off without making a racket the people inside would hear. Part of the inner door was beginning to glow now. She wasn't too worried about it; hand lasers were not likely to burn through the metal. Someone would be going for heavy equipment by now. It would do them no good to go to adjacent airlocks—which would probably have suits in them, too—because on the outside they couldn't force the door against the air pressure, and they couldn't force the lock to cycle as long as she was inside to override the command.

Unless it occurred to them that she would be suiting up, and someone would be waiting outside as soon as the outer door opened. . . .

She spent a few bad minutes waiting for the air to leak to the outside. It didn't help her state of mind when the Bellman began to speak to her.

"Your situation is hopeless. I presume you know that."

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She jumped, then realized he was speaking to her through the intercom, and it was being relayed to her suit radio. He didn't know she was in the suit, then.

"I don't know anything of the kind," she said. "The police will be here in a few minutes. You'd better get going while you've got the chance."

"Sorry. That won't work. I know you got through, but I also know they didn't trace you."

The air pressure dial read zero. Bach held the chain knife and pulled the door open. She stuck her head out. No one was waiting for her.

She was fifty meters away across the gently rolling plain when she suddenly stopped.

It was at least four kilometers to the nearest airlock that did not lead back into the plantation. She had plenty of air, but was not sure about her strength. The midwife mercifully spared her the pain she should have been going through, but her arms and legs felt like lead. Could they follow her faster than she could run? It seemed likely.

Of course, there was another alternative.

She thought about what they had planned for Joanna, then loped back to the dome. She moved like a skater, with her feet close to the ground.

It took three jumps before she could grab the upper edge of the metal wall with one gauntlet, then she could not lift her weight with just the one arm. She realized she was a step away from total exhaustion. With both hands, she managed to clamber up to stand on a narrow ledge with her feet among the bolts that secured the hold-down cables to the top of the wall. She leaned down and looked through the transparent vacuplast. A group of five people stood around the inner lock door. One of them, who had been squatting with his elbows on his knees, stood up now and pressed a button beside the lock. She could only see the top of his head, which was protected by a blue cap.

"You found the suit, didn't you?" the Bellman said. His voice was quiet, unemotional. Bach said nothing. "Can you still hear me?"

"I can hear you," Bach said. She held the chain knife and squeezed the handle; a slight vibration in her glove was the only indication that it was working. She put the edge of the blade to the plastic film and began to trace the sides of a square, one meter wide.

"I thought you could," he said. "You're on your way already. Of course, I wouldn't have mentioned the suit, in case you *hadn't* found it, until one of my own men reached the next lock and was on his way around the outside. Which he is."

"Um-hmm." Bach wanted him to keep talking. She was worried they would hear the sound of the knife as it slowly cut its way through the tough plastic.

"What you might like to know is that he has an infrared detector with him. We used it to track you inside. It makes your footprints glow. Even your suit loses heat enough through the boots to make the machine useful. It's a very good machine."

Bach hadn't thought of that, and didn't like it at all. It might have been best to take her chances trying to reach the next airlock. When the man arrived he would quickly see that she had doubled back.

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"Why are you telling me all this?" she asked. The square was now bordered with shallow grooves, but it was taking too long. She began to concentrate just on the lower edge, moving the knife back and forth.

"Thinking out loud," he said, with a self-conscious laugh. "This is an exhilarating game, don't you agree? And you're the most skilled quarry I've pursued in many years. Is there a secret to your success?"

"I'm with the police," Bach said. "Your people stumbled into a stake-out."

"Ah, that explains a lot," he said, almost gratefully.

"Who *are* you, anyway?" she asked.

"Just call me the Bellman. When I heard you people had named me that, I took a fancy to it."

"Why babies? That's the part I can't understand."

"Why veal? Why baby lamb chops? How should I know? I don't eat the stuff. I don't know anything about meat, but I know a good racket, and a fertile market, when I see them. One of my customers wants babies, that's what he gets. I can get any age." He sighed again. "And it's so easy, we grow sloppy. We get careless. The work is so routine. From now on we'll kill quickly. If we'd killed you when you got out of the tube, we'd have avoided a lot of bother."

"A lot more than you expect, I hope." Damn! Why wasn't the knife through yet? She hadn't thought it would take this long. "I don't understand, frankly, why you let me live as long as you did. Why lock me up, then come to kill me hours later?"

"Greed, I'm afraid," the Bellman said. "You see, they were not coming to kill you. You over-reacted. I was attempting to combine one business with another. There are uses for live pregnant women. I have many customers. Uses for live babies, too. We generally keep them for a few months."

Bach knew she should question him about that, as a good police officer. The department would want to know what he did. Instead, she bore down on the knife with all her strength and nearly bit through her lower lip.

"I could use someone like you," he said. "You don't really think you can get away, do you? Why don't you think it over? We could make . . ."

Peering down through the bubble, Bach saw the Bellman look up. He never finished his offer, whatever it was. She saw his face for an instant—a perfectly ordinary face that would not have seemed out of place on an accountant or a bank teller—and had the satisfaction of seeing him realize his mistake. He did not waste time in regrets. He instantly saw his only chance, abandoned the people working on the lock without warning them, and began to run at full speed back into the cornfield.

The bottom edge of the square parted at that moment. Bach felt something tugging on her hand, and she moved along the narrow ledge away from the hole. There was no sound as the sides of the square peeled back, then the whole panel broke free and the material began to tear from each of the corners. The surface of the bubble began to undulate sluggishly.

It was eerie; there was nothing to hear and little to see as the air rushed out of the gaping hole. Then suddenly storms of cornstalks, shorn of leaves and ears, erupted like flights of artillery rockets and flung themselves into the blackness. The stream turned white, and Bach could not figure out why that should be.

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The first body came through and sailed an amazing distance before it impacted in the gray dust.

The place was a beehive of activity when Lisa Babcock arrived. A dozen police crawlers were parked outside the wall with dozens more on their way. The blue lights revolved silently. She heard nothing but her own breathing, the occasional terse comment on the emergency band, and the faint whirring of her legs.

Five bodies were arranged just outside the wall, beside the large hole that had been cut to give vehicle access to the interior of the plantation. She looked down at them dispassionately. They looked about as one would expect a body to look that had been blown from a cannon and then quick-frozen.

Bach was not among them.

She stepped inside the dome for a moment, unable to tell what the writhing white coating of spongy material was until she picked up a handful. Popcorn. It was twenty centimeters deep inside, and still growing as raw sunlight and vacuum caused the kernels to dry and explode. If Bach was in there, it could take days to find her body. She went back outside and began to walk along the outer perimeter of the wall, away from where all the activity was concentrated.

She found the body face down, in the shadow of the wall. It was hard to see; she had nearly tripped over it. What surprised her was the spacesuit. If she had a suit, why had she died? Pursing her lips, she grabbed one shoulder and rolled it over.

It was a man, looking down in considerable surprise at the hilt of a chain knife growing from his chest, surrounded by a black, broken flower of frozen blood. Babcock began to run.

When she came to the lock she pounded on the metal door, then put her helmet to it. After a long pause, she heard the answering taps.

It was another fifteen minutes before they could bring a rescue truck around and mate it to the door. Babcock was in the truck when the door swung open, and stepped through first by the simple expedient of elbowing a fellow cop with enough force to bruise ribs.

At first she thought that, against all her hopes, Bach was dead. She sprawled loosely with her back propped against the wall, hugging the baby in her arms. She didn't seem to be breathing. Mother and child were coated with dirt, and Bach's legs were bloody. She seemed impossibly pale. Babcock went to her and reached for the baby.

Bach jerked, showing surprising strength. Her sunken eyes slowly focused on Babcock's face, then she looked down at Joanna and grinned foolishly.

"Isn't she the prettiest thing you ever saw?" ○

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THE FIRST LIVING SKYSCRAPER COPES WITH AN EARTHQUAKE

Bending forces warp me
and rumbles shake my girders.
My databases say this is normal
in a seismically active area
but the fear moves like blood pulses
along my feedback cables
desperately wrestling me into stillness.
My inhabitants code in location
coordinates that I instantly
convey to rescue personnel.
I work, I perform my duties
while the trickster Earth
that anchors my foundation
laughs and shrugs and twitches
and does not care
about the fear of falling
that carves open
my lofty fragile soul.

—Mario Milosevic

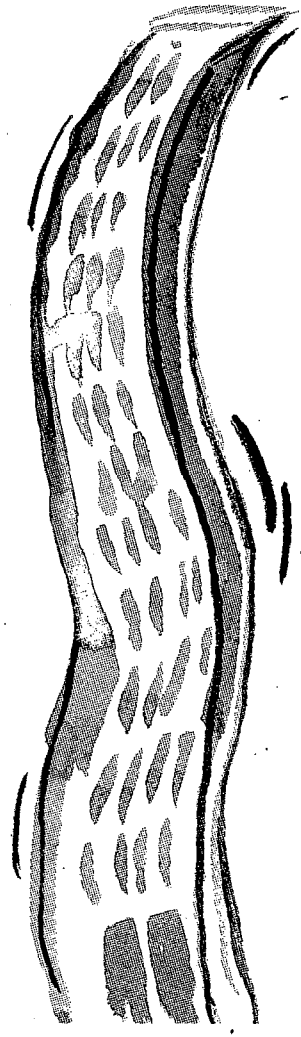

Illustration by June Levine

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DEAD WORLDS

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead lives near Seattle, and works in the aerospace industry. He's married and has two children—Dan and Ruby. The author was a winner in Stephen King's "On Writing" exercise in 2001, and he has two novels that he hopes to sell. "Dead Worlds" is Mr. Skillingstead's first story to be published in *Asimov's*.

A week after my retrieval, I went for a drive in the country. I turned the music up loud, Aaron Copland. The two lane blacktop wound into late summer woods. Sun and shadow slipped over my Mitsubishi. I felt okay, but how long could it last? The point, I guess, was to find out.

I was driving too fast, but that's not why I hit the dog. Even at a reduced speed, I wouldn't have been able to stop in time. I had shifted into a slightly banked corner overhung with maple—and the dog was just there. A big shepherd, standing in the middle of the road with his tongue hanging out, as if he'd been running. Brakes, clutch, panicked wrenching of the wheel, a tight skid. The heavy thud of impact felt through the car's frame.

I turned off the digital music stream and sat a few moments in silence except for the nearly subaudible ripple of the engine. In the rearview mirror, the dog lay in the road.

I swallowed, took a couple of deep breaths, then let the clutch out, slowly rolled onto the shoulder, and killed the engine.

The door swung smoothly up and away. A warm breeze scooped into the car, carrying birdsong and the muted purl of running water—a creek or stream.

I walked back to the dog. He wasn't dead. At the sound of my footsteps approaching, he twisted his head around and snapped at me. I halted a few yards away. The dog whined. Bloody foam flecked his lips. His hind legs twitched brokenly.

"Easy," I said.

The dog whimpered, working his jaws. He didn't snap again, not even when I hunkered close and laid my hand between his ears. The short hairs bristled against my palm.

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His chest heaved. He made a grunting, coughing sound. Blood spattered the road. I looked on, dispassionate. Already, I was losing my sense of emotional connection. I had deliberately neglected to take my pill that morning.

Then the woman showed up.

I heard her trampling through the underbrush. She called out, "Buddy! Buddy!"

"Here," I said.

She came out of the woods, holding a red nylon leash, a woman maybe thirty-five years old, with short blond hair, wearing a sleeveless blouse, khaki shorts, and ankle boots. She hesitated. Shock crossed her face. Then she ran to us.

"Buddy, oh Buddy!"

She knelt by the dog, tears spilling from her blue eyes. My chest tightened. I wanted to cherish the emotion. But was it genuine, or a residual effect of the drug?

"I'm sorry," I said. "He was in the road."

"I took him off the leash," she said. "It's my fault."

She kept stroking the dog's side, saying his name. Buddy laid his head in her lap as if he was going to sleep. He coughed again, choking up blood. She stroked him and cried.

"Is there a vet?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

Buddy shuddered violently and ceased breathing; that was the end. "We'd better move him out of the road," I said.

She looked at me and there was something fierce in her eyes. "I'm taking him home," she said.

She struggled to pick the big shepherd up in her arms. The dog was almost as long as she was tall.

"Let me help you. We can put him in the car."

"I can manage."

She staggered with Buddy, feet scuffing, the dog's hind legs limp, like weird dance partners. She found her balance, back swayed, and carried the dead dog into the woods.

I went to the car, grabbed the keys. My hand reached for the glove box, but I drew it back. I was gradually becoming an Eye again, a thing of the Tank. But no matter what, I was through with the pills. I wanted to know if there was anything real left in me.

I locked the car and followed the woman into the woods.

She hadn't gotten far. I found her sitting on the ground crying, hugging the dog. She looked up.

"Help me," she said. "Please."

I carried the dog to her house, about a hundred yards. The body seemed to get heavier in direct relation to the number of steps I took.

It was a modern house, octagonal, lots of glass, standing on a green expanse of recently cut lawn. We approached it from the back. She opened a gate in the wooden fence, and I stepped through with the dog. That was about as far as I could go. I was feeling it in my arms, my back. The woman touched my shoulder.

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"Please," she said. "Just a little farther."

I nodded, clenched my teeth, and hefted the dead weight. She led me to a tool shed. Finally, I laid the dog down. She covered it with a green tarp and then pulled the door shut.

"I'll call somebody to come out. I didn't want Buddy to lie by the road or in the woods where the other animals might get at him."

"I understand," I said, but I was drifting, beginning to detach from human sensibilities.

"You better come inside and wash," she said.

I looked at my hands. "Yeah."

I washed in her bathroom. There was blood on my shirt and she insisted I allow her to launder it. When I came out of the bathroom in my T-shirt, she had already thrown my outer shirt, along with her own soiled clothes, into the washer, and called the animal control people, too. Now wearing a blue shift, she offered me iced tea, and we sat together in the big, sunny kitchen, drinking from tall glasses. I noted the flavor of lemon, the feel of the icy liquid sluicing over my tongue. Sensation without complication.

"Did you have the dog a long time?"

"About eight years," she said. "He was my husband's, actually."

"Where is your husband?"

"He passed away two years ago."

"I'm sorry."

She was looking at me in a strange way, and it suddenly struck me that she knew what I was. Somehow, people can tell. I started to stand up.

"Don't go yet," she said. "Wait until they come for Buddy. Please?"

"You'll be all right by yourself."

"Will I?" she said. "I haven't been all right by myself for a long, long time. You haven't even told me your name."

"It's Robert."

She reached across the table for my hand and we shook. "I'm Kim Pham," she said. I was aware of the soft coolness of her flesh, the way her eyes swiveled in their wet orbits, the lemon exhalation of her breath.

"You're an Eye," she said.

I took my hand back.

"And you're not on your medication, are you?"

"It isn't medication, strictly speaking."

"What is it, then?"

A lie, I thought, but said, "It restores function. Viagra for the emotionally limp, is the joke."

She didn't smile.

"I know all the jokes," she said. "My husband was a data analyst on the Tau Boo Project. The jokes aren't funny."

The name Pham didn't ring any bells, but a lot of people flogged data at the Project.

"Why don't you take your Viagra or whatever you want to call it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe I'm allergic."

"Or you don't trust that the emotional and cognitive reality is the same one you possessed before the Tank."

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I stared at her. She picked up her iced tea and sipped.

"I've read about you," she said.

"Really."

"Not you in particular. I've read about Eyes, the psychological phenomenon."

"Don't forget the sexual mystique."

She looked away. I noted the way the musculature of her neck worked, the slight flushing near her hairline. I was concentrating, but knew I was close to slipping away.

"Being an Eye is not what the public generally thinks," I said.

"How is it different?"

"It's more terrible."

"Tell me."

"The Tank is really a perfect isolation chamber. Negative gravity, total sensory deprivation. Your body is covered with transdermal patches. The cranium is cored to allow for the direct insertion of the conductor. You probably knew that much. Here's what they don't say: The process kills you. To become an Eye, you must literally surrender your life."

I kept talking because it helped root me in my present consciousness. But it wouldn't last.

"They keep you functioning in the Tank, but it's more than your consciousness that rides the tachyon stream. It's your *being*, it's who you are. And somehow, between Earth and the robot receiver fifty light-years away, it sloughs off, all of it except your raw perceptions. You become a thing of the senses, not just an Eye but a hand, a tongue, an ear. You inhabit a machine that was launched before you were born, transmit data back along a tachyon stream, mingled with your own thought impulses for analysts like your husband to dissect endlessly. Then they retrieve you, and all they're really retrieving is a thing of raw perception. They tell you the drugs restore chemical balances in your brain, vitalize cognitive ability. But really, it's a lie. You're dead, and that's all there is to it."

The animal control truck showed up, and I seized the opportunity to leave. The world was breaking up into all its parts now. People separate from the earth upon which they walked. A tree, a door knob, a blue eye swiveling. Separate parts constituting a chaotic and meaningless whole.

At the fence, I paused and looked back, saw Kim Pham watching me. She was like the glass of iced tea, the dead weight of the dog, the cold pool on the fourth planet that quivered like mercury as I probed it with a sensor.

Back in the car, I sat. I had found the automobile, but I wasn't sure I could operate it. All I could see or understand were the thousand individual parts, the alloys and plastics, the wires and servos and treated leather, and the aggregate smell.

A rapping sounded next to my left ear. Thick glass, blue eyes, bone structure beneath stretched skin. I comprehended everything, but understood nothing. The eyes went away. Then: "You better take this." Syllables, modulated air. A bitter taste.

Retrieval.

I blinked at the world, temporarily restored to coherence.

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"Are you all right?" Kim was sitting beside me in the Mitsubishi.
"Yes, I'm all right."
"You looked catatonic."
"What time is it?"
"What time do you *think* it is?"
"I asked first."
"Almost seven o'clock."
"Shit."
"I was driving to town. I couldn't believe you were still sitting here."
I rubbed my eyes. "God, I'm tired."
"Where are you staying?"
"I have a charming little apartment at the Project."
"Do you feel well enough to drive there?"
"Yeah, but I don't want to."
"Why not?"
"They might not let me out again."
"Are you serious?"
"Not really."
"It's hard to tell with you."
"Did they take care of Buddy okay?"
"Yes."
I looked at her, and saw an attractive woman of thirty-five or so with light blue eyes.
"You better follow me back to my house. Besides, you forgot your shirt."
"That's right," I said.
I parked my car in the detached garage and stowed the keys under the visor. The Project had given me the car, but it was strictly for publicity purposes and day trips. We Eyes were supposed to have the right stuff.
There was a guest room with a twin bed and a window that admitted a refreshing breeze. I removed my shoes and lay on the bed and listened to hear if she picked up the phone, listened for the sound of her voice calling the Project. She would know people there, have numbers. Former associates of her husband. I closed my eyes, assuming that the next face I saw would be that of a Project security type.
It wasn't.
When I opened my eyes, the room was suffused with soft lamplight. Kim stood in the doorway.
"I have your pills," she said, showing me the little silver case.
"It's okay. I won't need another one until tomorrow."
She studied me.
"Really," I said. "Just one a day."
"What would have happened if I hadn't found you?"
"I would have sat there until somebody else saw me, and if no one else happened by, I would have gone on sitting there until doomsday. Mine, at any rate."
"Did you mean it when you said the Project people wouldn't let you leave again?"
I thought about my answer. "It's not an overt threat. They'd like to get another session out of me. I think they're a little desperate for results."

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"Results equal funding, my husband used to say."

"Right."

"My husband was depressed about the lack of life out there."

I sat up on the bed, rubbing my arms, which felt goosebumpy in spite of the warmth.

"How did he die?" I asked.

"A tumor in his brain. It was awful. Toward the end, he was in constant pain. They medicated him heavily. He didn't even know me anymore." She looked away. "I'm afraid I got a little desperate myself after he died. But I'm stronger now."

"Why do you live out here all by yourself?

"It's my home. If I want a change, there's a cottage up in Oregon, Cannon Beach. But I'm used to being left on my own."

"Used to it?"

"It seems to be a theme in my life."

It was also a statement that begged questions, and I asked them over coffee in the front room. Her parents were killed in a car accident when she was fourteen. Her aunt had raised her, but it was an awkward relationship.

"I felt more like an imposition than a niece."

And then, of course, there was Mr. Pham and the brain tumor. When she finished, something inside me whimpered to get out, but I wouldn't let it.

"Sometimes, I think I'd prefer to be an Eye," Kim said.

"Trust me, you wouldn't."

"Why not?" She was turned to the side, facing me on the couch we shared, one leg drawn up and tucked under, her face alive, eyes questing.

"I already told you: Because you'd have to die."

"I thought that was you being metaphorical."

I shook my head, patted the case of pills now replaced in the cargo pocket of my pants.

"I'm in these pills," I said. "The 'me' you're now talking to. But it isn't the 'me' I left behind when I climbed into the Tank." I sipped my coffee. "There's no official line on that, by the way. It's just my personal theory."

"It's kind of neurotic."

"Kind of."

"I don't even think you really believe it."

I shrugged. "That's your prerogative."

For a while, we didn't talk.

"It does get lonely out here sometimes," Kim said.

"Yes."

Her bedroom was nicer than the guest room. With the lights out, she dialed to transparency three of the walls and the ceiling, and it was like lying out in the open with a billion stars overhead and the trees waving at us. I touched her naked belly and kissed her. Time unwound deliciously, but eventually wound back up tight as a watch-spring and resumed ticking.

We lay on our backs, staring up, limbs entwined. The stars wheeled imperceptibly. I couldn't see Tau Boo, and that was fine with me.

"Why did you do it, then?" she asked.

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"Because it felt good. Plus, you seemed to be enjoying yourself as well."

"Not that. Why did you want to be an Eye?"

"Oh. I wanted to see things that no one else could see, ever. I wanted to travel farther than it was possible for a man physically to travel. Pure ego. Which is slightly ironic."

"Worth it?"

I thought of things, the weird aquamarine sky of the fourth planet, the texture of nitrogen-heavy atmosphere. Those quicksilver pools. But I also recalled the ripping away of my personality, and how all those wonders in my mind's eye were like something I'd read about or seen pictures of—unless I went off the pill and allowed myself to become pregnant with chaos. Then it was all real and all indistinguishable, without meaning.

"No," I said, "it wasn't worth it."

"When I think about it," Kim said, "it feels like escape."

"There's that too, yes."

In the morning, I kissed her bare shoulder while she slept. I traced my fingers lightly down her arm, pausing at the white scars on her wrist. She woke up and pulled her arm away. I kissed her neck, and we made love again.

Later, I felt disinclined to return to the Project compound and equally disinclined to check in, which I was required to do.

"Why don't you stay here?" Kim said.

It sounded good. I swallowed my daily dose of personality with my first cup of coffee. In fact, I made a habit of it every morning that I woke up lying next to Kim. Some nights, we fell asleep having neglected to dial the walls back to opacity, and I awakened with the vulnerable illusion that we were outdoors. Once, I felt as if I was being watched, and when I opened my eyes, I saw a doe observing us from the lawn.

I began to discover my health and some measure of happiness that I hadn't previously known. Before, always, I'd been a loner. Kim's story was essentially my story, with variations. It was partly what had driven me to the Tau Boo Project. But for those two weeks, living with Kim Pham, I wasn't alone, not in the usual sense. This was something new in my world. It was good. But it could also give me that feeling I'd had when I woke up in the open with something wild watching me.

One morning, the *last* morning, I woke up in our indoor-outdoor bedroom and found Kim weeping. Her back was to me, her face buried in her pillow. Her shoulders made little hitching movements with her sobs. I touched her hair.

"What's wrong?"

Her voice muffled by the pillow, she said, "I can't stand any more *leaving*."

"Hey—"

She turned into me, her eyes red from crying. "I *mean* it," she said. "I couldn't stand any more."

I held her tightly while the sun came up.

At the breakfast table, I opened the little silver pill case. There were only three pills left. I took one with my first cup of dark French roast. Kim stared at the open case before I snapped it shut.

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"You're almost out," she said.

"Yeah."

"Robert, it's not like what you said. Those pills aren't you. They allow you to feel, that's all. You can't always be afraid."

I contemplated my coffee.

"Listen," she said. "I used to be envious of Eyes. No more pain, no more loneliness, no more fear. Life with none of the messiness of living. But I was wrong. That isn't life at all. *This* is. What we have."

"So I'll get more pills." I smiled.

Only it wasn't like a trip to the local pharmacy. There was only one place to obtain the magic personality drug: The Project. I decided that I should go that day, that there was no point in waiting for my meager supply to run out.

Kim held onto me like somebody clinging to a pole in a hurricane.

"I'll come with you," she said.

"They won't let you past the gate."

"I don't care. I'll wait outside, then."

We took her car. She parked across the street. We embraced awkwardly in the front seat. I was aware of the guard watching us.

"You've hardly told me anything personal about yourself," she said. "And here I've told you all my secret pain."

"Maybe I don't have any secret pain."

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't."

"I'll spill my guts when I come out. Promise."

She didn't want to let go, but I was ready to leave. I showed the guard my credentials and he passed me through. I turned and waved to Kim.

"She's a pretty one," the guard said.

I sat in a room. They relieved me of my pill case. I was "debriefed" by a young man who behaved like an automaton, asking questions, checking off my answers on his memorypad. Where had I spent the last two weeks? Why had I failed to communicate with the Project? Did I feel depressed, anxious? Some questions I answered, some I ignored.

"I just want more pills," I said. "I'll check in next time, cross my heart."

A man escorted me to the medical wing, where I underwent a thorough and pointless physical examination. When it was over, Orley Campbell, assistant director of the Tau Boo Project, sat down to chat while we awaited the results of various tests.

"So our stray lamb has returned to the fold," he said. Orley was a tall man with a soft face and the beginnings of a pot belly. I didn't like him.

"Baaa," I said.

"Same old Bobbie."

"Yep, same old me. When do I get out of here?'

"This isn't a jail. You're free to leave any time you wish."

"What about my pills?"

"You'll get them, don't worry about that. You owe us one more session, you know."

"I know."

"Are you having misgivings? I've looked over your evaluation. You appear somewhat depressed."

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"I'm not in the least bit depressed."

"Aren't you? I wish I could say the same."

"What time is it? How long have I been here, Orley?"

"Oh, not long. Bobbie, why not jump right back on the horse? If you'd like to relax for a couple of weeks more, that's absolutely not a problem. You just have to remember to check in. I mean, that's part of the drill, right? You knew that when you signed on."

I thought about Kim, waiting outside the gate. Would she still be there? Did I even want her to be? I could feel my consciousness spreading thin. Orley kept smiling at me. "I guess I'm ready," I said.

A month is a long time to exist in the Tank. Of course, as an Eye, you are unaware of passing hours. You inhabit a sensory world at the far end of a tachyon tether. I've looked at romanticized illustrations of this. The peaceful dreamer at one end, the industrious robot on the other. In between, the data flows along an ethereal cord of light. Blah. They keep you alive intravenously, maintain hydration, perform body waste removal. A device sucks out the data. It's fairly brutal.

I recouped in the medical wing for several days. I had my pills and a guarantee of more, all I would require. I had put in the maximum Tank time and could not return without suffering serious and permanent brain damage.

My marathon Tank session had yielded zip in terms of the Project's primary goal. The fourth planet was dead.

Now I would have money and freedom and a future, *if* I wanted one. I spent my hours reading, thinking about warm climates. Kim Pham rapped on my memory, but I wouldn't open the door.

A week after my retrieval, I insisted on being released from the medical wing, and nobody put up an argument. I'd served my purpose. Orley caught up to me as I was leaving the building. I was hobbling on my weak legs, carrying my belongings in a shoulder bag. Orley picked up my hand and shook it.

"Good luck to you," he said. "What's first on the agenda, a little 'Eye candy?'"

I wasn't strong enough to belt him. He looked morose and tired, which is approximately the way I felt myself. When I didn't reply, he went on:

"Cruising a little close to home last time, weren't you? That Pham woman was persistent. She came around every day for two weeks straight. Nice-looking, but older than the others. I guess you would get tired of the young ones after a while."

The smirk is what did it. I found some ambition and threw a decent punch that bloodied his nose.

A cab picked me up at the gate. On impulse, I switched intended destinations. Instead of the airport, I provided sketchy directions, and we managed to find Kim's house without too much difficulty.

The house had an abandoned look, or at least I thought so. A mood can color things, though, and my mood was gloomy. The desperation of the Tau Boo Project had rubbed off on me. There was no life on the fourth planet, no life on any of the planets that had thus far been explored by our human Eyes. When the receiver craft were launched decades previ-

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ously, it was with a sense of great purpose and hope. But so far, the known universe had not proved too lively, which only made our own earth feel isolated, lonely—doomed, even.

The windows of Kim's house were all black. I knocked, waited, knocked again. I knew where she hid the spare key, on a hook under the back porch.

The house was silent. Every surface was filmed with dust. I drifted through the hollow rooms like a ghost.

Gone.

I pictured all the ways, all the ugly ways, she might have departed this world. Of course, there was no evidence that she had done anything of the sort. An empty house did not necessarily add up to a terminated life. Probably I was giving myself too much credit. But the gloom was upon me. And I could see the white scars on her wrists.

I sat on the carpeted floor of the master bedroom, still weak from the Tank. Hunger gnawed at me, but I didn't care. I let time unravel around the tightening in my chest, and, as darkness fell, I dialed the walls and ceiling clear, and lay on my back, and let exhausted sleep take me.

Lack of nourishment inhibits the efficacy of the pill. In the morning, I opened my eyes to dark pre-dawn and a point of reference that was rapidly growing muddy. The pills were in my bag, but my interest in digging them out was not very great. Why not let it all go? Become the fiber in the rug, the glass, the pulse of blood in my own veins. Why not?

I lay still and began to lose myself. I watched the dark blue sky pale toward dawn. At some point, the blue attained a familiar shade. Kim cradling her dead dog, the fierceness of her eyes. *I can manage.*

A sharp bubble of emotion formed in my throat, and I couldn't swallow it down. So I rolled over. Because maybe I could manage it, too. Maybe. I reached for my bag, my mind growing rapidly diffuse. The interesting articulation of my finger joints distracted me: Bone sleeved within soft flesh, blood circulating, finger pads palpating the tight fibers of the rug. Time passed. I shook myself, groped forward, touched the bag, forgot why it was so important, flickeringly remembered, got my hand on the case, fingered a pill loose onto the rug, belly-crawled, absently scanning details, little yellow pill nestled in fibers, extend probe (tongue), and swallow.

One personality pill with lint chaser.

I came around slowly, coalescing back into the mundane world, an empty stomach retarding the absorption process. Eventually, I stood up. First order of business: food. I found some stale crackers in a kitchen cabinet. Ambrosia. Standing at the sink, gazing out the window, I saw the garage. I stopped chewing, the crackers like crumbled cardboard in my mouth. I'd thought of ropes and drugs and razors. But what about exhaust?

I walked toward the garage, my breathing strangely out of sync. I stopped to gather my courage, or whatever it was I'd need to proceed.

Then I opened the door.

There was one car in the double space. My Mitsubishi, still parked as I'd left it. I climbed into the unlocked car and checked for the keys under the visor. They fell into my lap, note attached. From Kim.

It wasn't a suicide note. O

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NIMBY AND THE DIMENSION HOPPERS

Cory Doctorow

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Don't get me wrong—I *like* unspoiled wilderness. I *like* my sky clear and blue and my city free of the thunder of cars and jackhammers. I'm no technocrat. But goddammit, who wouldn't want a fully automatic, laser-guided, armor-piercing, self-replenishing personal sidearm?

Nice turn of phrase, huh? I finally memorized it one night, from one of the hoppers, as he stood in my bedroom, pointing his hand-cannon at another hopper, enumerating its many charms: "This is a laser-guided blah blah blah. Throw down your arms and lace your fingers behind your head, blah blah blah." I'd heard the same dialog nearly every day that month, whenever the dimension-hoppers catapulted into my home, shot it up, smashed my window, dived into the street, and chased one another through my poor little shtetl, wreaking havoc, maiming bystanders, and then gating out to another poor dimension to carry on there.

Assholes.

It was all I could do to keep my house well-fed on sand to replace the windows. Much more hopper invasion and I was going to have to extrude its legs and babayaga to the beach. Why the hell was it always *my* house, anyway?

I wasn't going to get back to sleep, that much was sure. The autumn

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wind blowing through the shattered window was fragrant with maple and rich decay and crisp hay, but it was also cold enough to steam my breath and turn me out in all-over gooseflesh. Besides, the racket they were making out in the plaza was deafening, all supersonic thunderclaps and screams from wounded houses. The househusbands would have their work cut out for them come morning.

So I found a robe and slippers and stumbled down to the kitchen, got some coffee from one of the nipples and milk from another, waited for the noise to recede into the bicycle fields and went outside and knocked on Sally's door.

Her bedroom window flew open and she hung her head out. "Barry?" she called down.

"Yeah," I called back up, clouds of condensed breath obscuring her sleep-gummed face. "Let me in—I'm freezing to death."

The window closed and a moment later the door swung open. Sally had wrapped a heavy duvet around her broad shoulders like a shawl, and underneath, she wore a loose robe that hung to her long, bare toes. Sally and I had a thing, once. It was serious enough that we attached our houses and joined the beds. She curled her toes when I tickled her. We're still friends—hell, our houses are still next door to one another—but I haven't curled her toes in a couple of years.

"Jesus, it can't be three in the morning, can it?" she said as I slipped past her and into the warmth of her house.

"It can and is. Transdimensional crime fighters hew to no human schedule." I collapsed onto her sofa and tucked my feet under my haunches. "I have had more than enough of this shit," I said, massaging my temples.

Sally sank down next to me and threw her comforter over my lap, then gave my shoulder a squeeze. "It's taking a toll on all of us. The Jeffersons are going to relocate. They've been writing to their cousins in Niagara Falls, and they say that there're hardly any hoppers down there. But how long is that gonna last, I wonder?"

"Oh, I don't know. The hoppers could go away tomorrow. We don't know that they're going to be here forever."

"Of course I know it. You can't put the genie back in the bottle. They've got d-hoppers now—they're not going to just stop using them."

I didn't say anything, just stared pointedly at the abstract mosaic covering her parlor wall: closely fitted pieces of scrap aluminum, plastics too abstruse to feed to even the crudest house, rare beach-glass and bunched vinyl.

"That's different," she said. "We ditched the technocracy because we found something that worked better. No one decided it was too dangerous and had to be set aside for our own good. It just got . . . obsolete. Nothing's going to make d-hoppers obsolete for those guys." Out in the plaza, the booms continued, punctuated by the peristaltic noises of houses hurrying away. Sally's house gave a shudder in sympathy, and the mosaic rippled.

I held my cup away from the comforter as coffee sloshed over the edge and to the floor, where the house drank it greedily.

"No caffeine!" Sally said as she sopped up the coffee with her stockinged foot. "The house gets all jumpy."

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I opened my mouth to say something about Sally's crackpot house-husbandry theories, and then the door was blown off its hinges. A hopper in outlandish technocrat armor rolled into the parlor, sat up, snapped off three rounds in the general direction of the door (one passed through it, the other two left curdled houseflesh and scorch marks on the wall around it).

Sally and I levitated out of our seats and dived behind the sofa as another hopper rolled through the door and returned fire, missing his opponent but blowing away the mosaic. My heart hammered in my chest, and all my other clichés hackneyed in my chestnuts.

"You okay?" I hollered over the din.

"I think so," Sally said. A piece of jagged plastic was embedded in the wall inches over her head, and the house was keening.

A stray blast of electric thunder set the sofa ablaze, and we scrambled away. The second gunman was retreating under a volley of fire from the first, who was performing machine-assisted gymnastics around the parlor, avoiding the shots aimed at him. The second man made good his escape, and the first holstered his weapon and turned to face us.

"Sorry about the mess, folks," he said, through his faceplate.

I was speechless. Sally, though, cupped her ear and hollered "What?"

"Sorry," the gunman said.

"What?" Sally said again. She turned and said, "Can you make out what he's saying?" She winked at me with the eye that faced away from him.

"No," I said, slowly. "Can't make out a word."

"Sorry," he said again, more loudly.

"We! Can't! Understand! You!" Sally said.

The man raised his visor with an air of exasperation and said, "I'm sorry, all right?"

"Not as sorry as you're gonna be," Sally said, and jammed her thumb into his eye. He hollered and his gauntlets went to his face just as Sally snatched away his gun. She rapped the butt against his helmet to get his attention, then scampered back, keeping the muzzle aimed at him. The gunman looked at her with dawning comprehension, raising his arms, lacing his fingers behind his head and blah blah blah.

"Asshole," she said.

His name was Larry Roman, which explained the word "ROMAN" stenciled onto each piece of his armor. Getting it off of him was trickier than shelling a lobster, and he cursed us blue the whole way. Sally kept the gun trained on him, impassive, as I peeled off the sweaty carapace and bound his wrists and ankles.

Her house was badly injured, and I didn't think it would make it. Certainly, the walls' fading to a brittle, unhealthy white boded ill. The d-hopper itself was a curious and complex device, a forearm-sized lozenge seemingly cast of a single piece of metal—titanium?—and covered with a welter of confusing imprinted controls. I set it down carefully, not wanting to find myself inadvertently whisked away to a parallel universe.

Roman watched me from his good eye—the one that Sally poked was

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swollen shut—with a mixture of resentment and concern. "Don't worry," I said. "I'm not going to play with it."

"Why are you doing this?" he said.

I cocked my head at Sally. "It's her show," I said.

Sally kicked her smoldering sofa. "You killed my house," she said. "You assholes keep coming here and shooting up the place, without a single thought to the people who live here —"

"What do you mean, 'keep coming here?' This is the first time anyone's ever used the trans-d device."

Sally snorted. "Sure, in *your* dimension. You're a little behind schedule, pal. We've had hoppers blasting through here for months now."

"You're lying," he said. Sally looked coolly at him. I could have told him that that was no way to win an argument with Sally. I'd never found *any* way of winning an argument with her, but blank refusal didn't work for sure. "Look, I'm a police officer. The man I'm chasing is a dangerous criminal. If I don't catch him, you're all in danger."

"Really?" she drawled. "Greater danger than you assholes put us in when you shoot us?"

He swallowed. Stripped of his armor, wearing nothing but high-tech underwear, and he was finally getting scared. "I'm just doing my duty. Upholding the law. You two are going to end up in a lot of trouble. I want to speak to someone in charge."

I cleared my throat. "That would be me, this year. I'm the mayor."

"You're kidding."

"It's an administrative position," I apologized. I'd read up on civics of old, and I knew that mayoring wasn't what it once was. Still, I'm a fine negotiator, and that's what it takes nowadays.

"So what are you going to do with me?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll think of something," Sally said.

Sally's house was dead by sunrise. It heaved a terrible sigh, and the nipples started running with black gore. The stink was overpowering, so we led our prisoner shivering next door to my place.

My place wasn't much better. The cold wind had been blowing through my bedroom window all night, leaving a rime of frost over the house's delicate, thin-barked internal walls. But I've got a southern exposure, and as the sun rose, buttery light pierced the remaining windows and warmed the interior, and I heard the house's sap sluicing up inside the walls. We got ourselves coffees and resumed the argument.

"I tell you, Osborne's out there, and he's got the morals of a jackal. If I don't get to him, we're all in trouble." Roman was still trying to convince us to give him back his gear and let him get after his perp.

"What did he do, anyway?" I asked. Some sense of civic responsibility was nagging at me—what if the guy really *was* dangerous?

"Does it matter?" Sally asked. She was playing with Roman's gear, crushing my ornamental pebbles to powder with the power-assisted gauntlets. "They're all bastards. *Technocrats*." She spat out the word and powdered another pebble.

"He's a monopolist," Roman said, as though that explained everything.

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We must have looked confused, because he continued. "He's the Senior Strategist for a company that makes networked relevance filters. They've been planting malware online that breaks any standards-defined competing products. If he isn't brought to justice, he'll own the whole goddamn media ecology. He *must* be stopped!" His eyes flashed.

Sally and I traded looks, then Sally burst out laughing. "He did *what?*"

"He's engaged in unfair business practices!"

"Well, I think we'll be able to survive, then," she said. She hefted the pistol again. "So, Roman, you say that you folks just invented the d-hopper, huh?"

He looked puzzled. "The trans-d device," I said, remembering what he'd called it.

"Yes," he said. "It was developed by a researcher at the University of Waterloo and stolen by Osborne so he could flee justice. We had that one fabbed up just so we could chase him."

Aha. The whole shtetl was built over the bones of the University of Waterloo—my house must be right where the physics labs once stood; still stood, in the technocratic dimensions. That explained my popularity with the transdimensional set.

"How do you work it?" Sally asked, casually.

I wasn't fooled and neither was Roman. Sally's version of casual put my most intense vibe to shame.

"I can't disclose that," Roman said, setting his face in an expression of grim dutifulness.

"Aw, c'mon," Sally said, fondling the d-hopper. "What's the harm?"

Roman stared silently at the floor.

"Trial and error it is, then," Sally said, and poised a finger over one of the many inset controls.

Roman groaned.

"Don't do that. Please," he said. "I'm in enough trouble as it is."

Sally pretended she hadn't heard him. "How hard can it be, after all? Barry, we've both studied technocracy—let's figure it out together. Does this look like the on-switch to you?"

"No, no," I said, catching on. "You can't just go pushing buttons at random—you could end up whisked away to another dimension!" Roman appeared relieved. "We have to take it apart to see how it works first. I've got some tools out in the shed." Roman groaned.

"And if those don't work," Sally continued, "I'm sure these gloves would peel it open real quick. After all, if we break this one, there's always the other guy—Osborne? He's got one, too."

"I'll show you," Roman said. "I'll show you."

Roman escaped as we were finishing breakfast. It was my fault. I figured that once he'd taken us through the d-hopper's workings, he was cowed. Sally and I had a mini-spat over untying him, but that left me feeling all nostalgic and fuzzy for our romantic past, and maybe that's why I wasn't on my guard. It also felt less antisocial once my houseguest was untied and spooning up mueseli at my homey old kitchen table.

He was more cunning than I'd guessed. Square-jawed, blue-eyed (well,

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black-and-blue-eyed, thanks to Sally), and exhausted, he'd lulled me into a false sense of security. When I turned to squeeze another cup of coffee from the kitchen wall, he kicked the table over and scrambled away. Sally fired a bolt after him, which hit my already overwrought house and caused my toilet to flush and all my tchtotchkes to rain down from my shelves as it jerked. In an instant, Roman was scurrying away down the street.

"Sally!" I shouted, exasperated. "You could've killed him!"

She was ashen, staring at the pistol. "I didn't mean to! It was a reflex."

We both struggled into our shoes and took off after him. By the time I caught sight of him, he was off in the bicycle fields, uprooting a ripe mountain bike and pedaling away toward Guelph.

A group of rubberneckers congregated around us, most of the town, dressed in woolens and mitts against the frosty air. Sally and I were still in our pajamas, and I saw the town gossips taking mental notes. By supper, the housenet would be burning up with news of our reconciliation.

"Who was that?" Lemuel asked me. He'd been mayor before me, and still liked to take a proprietary interest in the comings and goings around town.

"D-hopper," Sally said. "Technocrat. He killed my house."

Lemuel clucked his tongue and scrunched up his round, ruddy face. "That's bad. The Beckers' house, too. Barry, you'd better send someone off to Toronto to parley for some more seed."

"Thank you, Lemuel," I said, straining to keep the irritation out of my voice. "I'll do that."

He held his hands up. "I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job," he said. "Just trying to help you out. Times like this, we all need to pull together."

"I just want to catch that son-of-a-bitch," Sally said.

"Oh, I expect he'll be off to his home dimension shortly," Lemuel said.

"Nuh-uh," I said. "We got—oomph." Sally trod on my foot.

"Yeah, I expect so," she said. "How about the other one—did anyone see where he went?"

"Oh, he took off east," Hezekiah said. He was Lemuel's son, and you could've nested them like Russian dolls: ruddy, paunchy, round-faced, and earnest. Hezekiah had a fine touch with the cigarette trees, and his grove was a local tourist stop. "Headed for Toronto, maybe."

"All right, then," Sally said. "I'll send word ahead. He won't get far. We'll head out and meet him."

"What about your house?" Lemuel asked.

"What about it?"

"Well, you've got to get your stuff moved out soon—the househusbands will be wanting to take it away for mulch."

"Tell them they can put my stuff in Barry's place," she said. I watched the gossipy looks flying.

Sally worked the housenet furiously as the househusbands trekked in and out of my place with armloads of her stuff. They kept giving me hey-big-fella looks, but I knew that any congratulations were premature. Sal-

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ly wasn't moving in to get romantic—she was doing it out of expedience, her primary motivation in nearly every circumstance. She scribed with the housenet stylus, back rigid, waiting impatiently for her distant correspondents to work their own styli, until every wall in my house was covered in temporary pigment. No one had seen Osborne.

"Maybe he went back to his dimension," I said.

"No, he's here. I saw his d-hopper before he ran out last night—it was a wreck."

"Maybe he fixed it," I said.

"And maybe he hasn't. This has got to stop, Barry. If you don't want to help, just say so. But stop trying to dissuade me." She slammed the stylus down. "Are you in or out?"

"I'm in," I said. "I'm in."

"Then get dressed," she said.

I was already dressed. I said so.

"Put on Roman's armor. We need to be on even footing with Osborne if we're going to catch him, and that stuff won't fit me."

"What about Roman?"

"He'll be back," she said. "We have his d-hopper."

What did I call it? "Outlandish technocrat armor?" Maybe from the outside. But once I was inside, man, I was a *god*. I walked on seven-league boots, boots that would let me jump as high as the treetops. My vision extended down to the infrared and up into the ultraviolet and further up into the electromagnetic, so that I could see the chemically encoded housenet signals traversing the root-systems that the houses all tied into, the fingers of polarized light lengthening as the sun dipped to the west. My hearing was acute as a rabbit's, the wind's soughing and the crackle of forest-creatures and the whoosh-whoosh of sap all clearly delineated and perfectly triangulated. We set out after Roman, and I quickly evolved a search-strategy: I would leap as high as I could, then spin around quickly as I fell back to earth, surveying the countryside in infrared for anything human-shaped. Once back on terra firma, I scooped up Sally and took a great leap forward—no waiting for her slow, unassisted legs to keep up with my gigantic strides—set her down, and repeated the process.

We kept after it for an hour or two, falling into a kind of pleasant reverie, lulled by the fiery crazy quilt of the autumn leaves viewed from great height. I'd seen color plates in old technocrat books, the earth shown from such heights, even from *space,* and of all the things we'd given up with technocracy, I think that flight was the thing that I wished for most fervently.

It was growing chilly by the time we reached Hamilton. Hamilton! In two hours! I was used to thinking of Hamilton as being a hard day's bike-ride from home, but here I was, not even out of breath, and there already. I gathered Sally into my arms and leapt toward the city-limits, enchanted by the sunset's torchy light over the hills, and something fast and hard smashed into me from the side. Instinctively, I tightened my grip on Sally, but she wasn't there—good thing, since with the armor's power-assist, squeezing Sally that hard might've broken her spine.

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I slammed into the dirt, the armor's suspension whining. I righted myself and heard Sally hollering. I looked up and there she was, squirming in Osborne's arms as he leapt away with her.

They headed west, back toward the shtetl, and I chased as best I could, but Osborne worked the armor like he'd been born in it. How must his dimension be, where people leap through the air on tireless, infinitely strong legs, enhanced vision and reflexes making light work of the banal realities of geography, time, and space?

I lost them by Flamborough. Panic scratched at my guts as I sought them through the entire electromagnetic spectrum, as I strained my ears to make out Sally's outraged bellows. A moment's reflection told me I was panicking needlessly: there was only one place they could be going: to the shtetl, to my house, to the d-hopper.

Except that I had the d-hopper with me, neatly clipped to the armor's left thigh-guard, in a small cargo-space. The right thigh-guard was full of miniature, telescoping survival bits of various description and a collection of pills that Roman had identified as nutritional supplements. Osborne wouldn't be getting out of my dimension any time soon.

I set off for home as fast as I could in the now near-total darkness. A bloody harvest moon rose behind me as I made my leaping dash, and then I got lost twice in the odd shadows it cast from my unfamiliar aerial vantage-points. Still, it took less than an hour traveling alone, not bothering to search anymore.

My house's own biosystems cast a welter of infrared shadows, making it impossible for me to tell if Sally and Osborne were inside, so I scrambled up the insulating ivy on the north side and then spidered along the walls, peering in the windows.

I found them in the Florida room at the back of the house. Osborne had his helmet off—he had a surprisingly boyish, good-natured face that took me off my guard for a moment—and was eating a slice of pumpkin pie from my fridge, his sidearm trained on Sally, who was glaring at him from her seat in the rickety twig-chair she'd given me for my birthday half a decade before.

The biolume porch-lamp glowed brightly inside the Florida room, and I knew that it would be throwing up glare on the inside of the windows. Emboldened, I crouched down and duck-walked the length of the windowsill, getting the lay of the land before deciding on my next course of action. Osborne's helmet was propped atop the fridge, staring blindly at me. The pistol was in his left hand, the pie in his right, and his finger was on the trigger. I couldn't think of any way to disarm him before he fired on Sally. I would have to parley. It's my strong-suit, anyway. That's why they made me mayor: I could bargain with those arrogant pricks in Toronto for house-seeds; with the fools of Hamilton for cold-temp citrusfruit; with the traveling circuses that demanded bicycle after bicycle in exchange for a night's entertainment. In Lemuel's day, the shtetl had hardly a bike to its name by March, the whole harvest traded away for our necessities. After my first year as mayor, we'd had to grow an extra barn with hooks along all the rafters to hang our spare bicycles from. I

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would parley with Osborne for Sally, extract a promise to steer clear of our dimension forever in exchange for his damned technocrat gadget.

I was raising a gauntleted hand to tap on the window when I was tackled from behind.

I had the presence of mind to stifle my grunt of surprise as the armor's gyros whined to keep me erect under the weight of the stranger on my back.

I reached behind me and grabbed my assailant by the shoulder, flipping him over my head and to the earth. He, too, stifled his groan, and as I peered at him in the false-light of my visor's display, I saw that it was Roman.

"You can't give him the trans-d device," he hissed. He massaged his shoulder. I felt a pang of guilt—that must've really hurt. I hadn't so much as slapped someone in ten years. Who had?

"Why not?" I asked.

"I have to bring him to justice. He's the only one with the key to his malware agents. If he gets away now, we'll never catch him—the whole world will be at his mercy."

"He's got Sally," I said. "If I need to give him the d-hopper to get her back, that's what I'm gonna do." Thinking: What the hell do I care about *your* world, pal?

He grimaced and flushed. He'd stolen a wooly coat and a pair of unripened gumboots from somewhere but he was still wearing nothing but his high-tech underwear underneath, and his lips were cyanotic blue. I was nice and toasty in the heated armor. Muffled voices came from my Florida room. I risked a peek. Sally was haranguing Osborne fiercely, though nothing but her baleful tone was discernable through the pane. Osborne was grinning.

I could have told him that that wasn't much of a strategy. He seemed to be chuckling, and I watched in horrified fascination as Sally stood abruptly, unmindful of the gun, and heaved her chair at his head. He raised his forearms to defend himself and his gun wasn't pointing at Sally anymore. No thinking at all, just action, and I jumped through the window, a technocrat action-hero snap-rolling into his shins, grappling with his gun hand, and my enhanced hearing brought me Sally's shouts, Osborne's grunts of surprise, Roman's bellowing passage through the sharp splinters of the window. I kept trying for Osborne's unprotected head, but he was *fast,* fast as a world where time is sliced into fractions of a second, fast as a person raised in that world, and I—who never measured time in a unit smaller than a morning—was hardly a match for him.

He fired the pistol wildly, setting the house to screaming. Before I knew it, Osborne had me pinned on my stomach, my arms trapped beneath me. He leveled the pistol at Sally again. "What a waste," he sighed, and took aim. I wriggled fiercely, trying to free my arms, and the d-hopper dropped into my gauntlet. Without thinking, I jammed as many controls as I could find and the universe stood on its head.

There was an oozy moment of panic as the world slurred and snapped back into focus, the thing taking less time than the description of it, so

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fast that I only assimilated it post-facto, days later. Osborne was still atop me, and I had the presence of mind to roll him off and get to my feet, snatch free my gun, and point it at his unprotected face.

He stood slowly, hands laced behind his head, and looked at me with a faint sneer.

"*What is your problem?*" a voice said from behind me. I kept the gun on Osborne and scuttled left so that I could see the speaker.

It was me.

Me, in a coarsely woven housecoat and slippers, eyes gummed with sleep, thin to gauntness, livid, shaking with rage. Osborne took advantage of my confusion and made a jump for the whole-again Florida room window. I squeezed off two rounds at his back and hit the house instead, which screamed. I heard knick-knacks rattling off their shelves.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" I heard myself shout from behind me, and then I was reeling with the weight of myself on my own back. Hands tugged at my helmet. Gently, I holstered my gun, shucked my gauntlets, and caught the hands.

"Barry," I said.

"How'd you know my name?"

"Get down from there, Barry, okay?"

He climbed down and I turned to face him. With slow, deliberate motions, I unsnapped the helmet and pulled it off. "Hey, Barry," I said.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he repeated, more exasperated than confused. "I should've known."

"Sorry," I said, sheepish now. "I was trying to save Sally's life."

"God, *why?*"

"What's your problem with Sally?"

"She sold us out! To Toronto! The whole shtetl hasn't got two bikes to rub together."

"Toronto? How many houses could we possibly need?"

He barked a humorless laugh. "Houses? Toronto doesn't make houses anymore. Wait there," he said and stomped off into the house's depths. He emerged a moment later holding a massive, unwieldy rifle. It had a technocratic feel, toolmarks and straight lines, and I knew that it had been manufactured, not grown. The barrel was as big around as my fist. "Civil defense," he said. "Sally's idea. We're all supposed to be ready to repel the raiders at a moment's notice. Can't you smell it?"

I took a deep breath through my nose. There was an ammonia-and-sulfur reek in the air, a sharp contrast to the autumnal crispness I was accustomed to. "What's that?"

"Factories. Ammo, guns, armor. It's all anyone does anymore. We're all on short rations." He gestured at the broken window. "Your friend's gonna get quite a surprise."

As if on cue, I heard a volley of distant thunder. The other Barry smiled grimly. "Scratch one d-hopper," he said. "If I were you, I'd ditch that getup before someone takes a shot at *you*."

I started to shuck Roman's armor when we both heard the sound of return fire, the crash of the technocrat pistol almost civilized next to the flatulence of Sally's homebrew blunderbusses. "He's tricky," I said.

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But the other Barry had gone pale and still and it occurred to me that Osborne was almost certainly firing on someone that this Barry counted as a friend. Sensitivity was never one of my strong suits.

I stripped off the rest of the armor and stood shivering in the frosty November air. "Let's go," I said, brandishing Roman's gun.

"You'll need a coat," said the other Barry. "Hang on." He disappeared into the house and came back with my second-best coat, the one with the big stain from years before on the right breast, remnants of a sloppily eaten breakfast of late blackberries right off the bush.

"Thanks," I said, feeling a tremor of dangerous weirdness as our hands touched.

The other Barry carried a biolume lamp at shoulder-height, leading the way, while I followed, noticing that his walk was splay-footed and lurching, then noticing that mine was, too, and growing intensely self-conscious about the whole matter. I nearly tripped myself a dozen times trying to correct it before we found the scene of Osborne's stand.

It was a small clearing where I'd often gone to picnic on summer days. The lantern lit up the ancient tree-trunks, scarred with gunshot, pits with coals glowing in them like malevolent eyes. Hazy wisps of wood smoke danced in the light.

At the edge of the clearing, we found Hezekiah on his back, his left arm a wreck of molten flesh and toothy splinters of bone. His breathing was shallow and fast, and his eyes were wide and staring. He rubbed at them with his good hand when he caught sight of us. "Seeing double. Goddamn gun blew up in my arms. Goddamn gun. Goddamn it."

Neither of us knew squat about first aid, but I left the other Barry crouched beside Hezekiah while I went for help, crashing through the dark but familiar woods.

Somewhere out there, Osborne was looking for the d-hopper, for a way home. I had it in the pocket of the stained, second-best coat. If he found it and used it, I'd be stranded here, where guns explode in your arms and Barry wishes that Sally was dead.

The streets of the shtetl, normally a friendly grin of neat little houses, had been turned snaggle-toothed and gappy by the exodus of villagers under the onslaught of d-hoppers. Merry's clinic was still there, though, and I approached it cautiously, my neck prickly with imagined, observing eyes.

I was barely there when I was tackled from the side by Osborne, who gathered me roughly in his arms and jumped back into the woods. We sailed through the night sky, the d-hopper crushed to my side by his tight, metallic embrace, and when he set down and dropped me, I scrambled backward on my ass, trying to put some distance between me and him.

"Hand it over," he said, pointing his gun at me. His voice was cold, and brooked no argument. But I'm a negotiator by trade. I thought fast.

"My fingers're on it now," I said, holding it through my pocket. "Just one squeeze and poof, off I go and you're stuck here forever. Why don't you put the gun away and we'll talk about this?"

He sneered the same sneer he'd given me in the Florida room. "Off you go with a slug in you, dead or dying. Take off the coat."

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"I'll be dead, you'll be stranded. If I hand it over, I'll be dead and you won't be stranded. Put the gun away."

"No arguments. Coat." He casually fired into the ground before me, showering me with hot clots of soft earth. Broken roots from the housenet squirmed as they attempted to route around the damage. I was so rattled I very nearly hit the button, but I kept my fingers still with an act of will.

"Gun," I said, as levelly as I could. My voice sounded squeaky to me. "Look," I said, "Look. If we keep arguing here, someone else will come along, and chances are, they'll be armed. Not every gun in this world blows up when you fire it," *I hope,* "and then you're going to be sorry. So will I, since you'll probably end up shooting me at the same time. Put it away, we'll talk it out. Come up with a solution we can both live with, you should excuse the expression."

Slowly, he holstered the gun.

"Toss it away, why don't you? Not far, just a couple meters. You're fast."

He shook his head. "Nervy bastard," he said, but he tossed the gun a few meters to the side.

"Now," I said, trying to disguise my sigh of relief. "Now, let's work it out."

Slowly, he flipped up his visor and looked at me as if I were a turd.

"The way I see it," I said, "We don't need to be at each other's throats. You want a dimension you can move freely in to avoid capture. We need a way to stop people from showing up and blowing the hell out of our homes. If we do this right, we can build a long-term relationship that'll benefit both of us."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Nothing you can't afford," I said, and started to parley in earnest. "First of all, you need to take me back to where you fetched me from. I need to get a doctor for Hezekiah."

He shook his head in disbelief. "What a frigging waste."

"First Hezekiah, then the rest. Complaining is just going to slow us down. Let's go." Without ceremony, I leapt into his arms. I rapped twice on his helmet. "Up, up and away," I said. He crushed me to his chest and leapt moonward.

"All right," I said as the moon dipped on the horizon. We'd been at it for hours, but were making some good headway. "You get safe passage—a place to hide, a change of clothes—in our shtetl whenever you want it. In exchange, we both return there now, then I turn over the d-hopper. You take Roman back with you—I don't care what you do with him once you're in your dimension, but no harm comes to him in mine."

"Fine," Osborne said, sullenly. That was a major step forward—it had taken two hours to get him as far as not shooting Roman on sight. I figured that in his own dimension, clad in his armor, armed with his pistol, Roman would have a fighting chance.

"Just one more thing," I said. Osborne swore and spat in the soft earth of the clearing where Hezekiah had blown his arm off. "Just a trifle. The next time you visit the shtetl, you bring us a spare trans-d device."

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"Why?" he asked.

"Never you mind," I said. "Think of it as good faith. If you want to come back to our shtetl and get our cooperation, you'll need to bring us a trans-d device, otherwise the deal's off."

The agreement wasn't immediate, but it came by and by. Negotiation is always at least partly a war of attrition, and I'm a patient man.

"Civil defense, huh?" I said to Sally. She was poring over a wall of her new house, where she and someone in Toronto were jointly scribing plans for a familiar-looking blunderbuss.

"Yes," she said, in a tone that said, *Piss off, I'm busy*.

"Good idea," I said.

That brought her up short. I didn't often manage to surprise her, and I savored a moment's gratification. "You think so?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "Let me show you." I held out my hand, and as she took it, I fingered the d-hopper in my pocket, and the universe stood on its head.

No matter how often I visit the technocratic dimensions, I'm always struck by the grace of the armored passers-by, their amazing leaps high over the shining buildings and elevated roadways. Try as I might, I can't figure out how they avoid crashing into one another.

In this version of the technocracy, the gun-shop was called "Eddy's." The last one I'd hit was called "Ed's." Small variations, but the basic routine was the same. We strolled into the shop boldly, and I waved pleasantly at Ed/Eddy. "Hi there," I said.

"Hey," he said. "Can I show you folks something?"

Sally's grip on my hand was vise-tight and painful. I thought she was freaking out over our jaunt into the transverse, but when I followed her gaze and looked out the window, I realized that there was something amiss about this place. Down the street, amid the shining lozenge-shaped buildings, stood a house that would've fit in back in the shtetl, housenet roots writhing into the concrete. In front of it were two people in well-manicured woolens and beautifully ripened gumboots. Familiar people. Sally and I. And there, on the street, was another couple—Sally and I—headed for Ed/Eddy's gun shop. I managed to smile and gasp out, "How about that fully automatic, laser-guided, armor-piercing, self-replenishing personal sidearm?"

Ed/Eddy passed it over, and as soon as the butt was securely in my hand, I looped my arm through Sally's and nailed the d-hopper. The universe stood on its head again, and we were back home, in the clearing where, a hairsbreadth away and a week ago, one version of Hezekiah had lost his arm.

I handed the gun to Sally. "More where this came from," I said.

She was shaking, and for a moment, I thought she was going to shout at me, but then she was laughing, and so was I.

"Hey," I said, "you feel like lunch? There's usually a great Italian joint just on the other side of the bicycle fields." O

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THE GINGERBREAD WOMAN REMEMBERS

My earliest memories were of hands,
large, shapely, clean–
kneading, rolling, flattening,
flesh against flesh, a pleasure certainly,
I was created by his esteem, imprinted
by his glance, his authorship.
My life took shape, obvious
that everything of me was also of him.
Buoyed upward by desire,
the heat of consummation firmed
his imprint of me. Now
everything of me yearns toward him.
He is everything I ever wanted,
his hands, oh yes, his lips. . . ,
his teeth.

–Sandra J. Lindow

Illustration by June Levine

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BERNARDO'S HOUSE

James Patrick Kelly

Jim Kelly's new collection, *Strange But Not a Stranger,* was released from Golden Gryphon in September of 2002, and his old collection, *Think Like a Dinosaur,* will return to print this September, again from Golden Gryphon. Between them, they contain seventeen of his nineteen June stories. Deranged Kelly fans who think they know which two got left out are invited to email him <*jim@jimkelly.net*> for a priceless e-prize.

A word of warning: There are brief sexual scenes in this story that may be disquieting to some.

The house was lonely. She checked her gate cams constantly, hoping that Bernardo would come back to her. She hadn't seen him in almost two years—he had never been gone this long before. Something must have happened to him. Or maybe he had just gotten tired of her. Although they had never talked about where he went when he wasn't with her, she was pretty sure she wasn't his only house. A famous doctor like Bernardo would have three houses like her. *Four*. She didn't like to think about him sleeping in someone else's bed. Which he would have been doing for *two years now*. She had been feeling dowdy recently. Could his tastes in houses have changed?

Maybe.

Probably.

Definitely.

She thought she might be too understated. Her hips were slim and her floors were pale Botticino marble. There wasn't much loft to her Epping couch cushions. Her blueprint showed a roving, size-seven dancer's body—Bernardo had specified raven hair and green eyes—and just nine simple but elegant rooms. She was a gourmet cook even though she wasn't designed to eat. Sure, back when he had first had her built he had cupped her breasts and told her that he liked them small, but maybe now what he wanted was wall-to-wall cable-knit carpet and swag drapery.

He had promised to bring her a new suite of wallscapes, which was good because there was only so much of colliding galaxies and the Sistine

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Chapel a girl could take. For the past nine weeks she had been cycling her walls through the sixteen million colors they could display. If she left each color up for two seconds, it would take her just under a year to review the entire palette.

Each morning for his sake she wriggled her body into one of the slinky sexwear patterns he had brought for her clothes processor. The binding bustier or the lace babydoll or the mesh camisole. She didn't much like the way the leather-and-chain teddy stuck to her skin; Bernardo had spared no expense on her tactiles. Even her couches could be aroused by the right touch. After she dressed, she polished her Amadea brass-and-chrome bathroom fixtures or her Enchantress pattern sterling silver flatware or her Cuprinox French copper cookware. Sometimes she dusted, although the reticulated polyfoam in her air handlers screened particles larger than .03 microns. She missed Bernardo so much. Sometimes masturbating helped, but not much.

He had erased her memory of their last hours together—the only time he had ever made her forget. All she remembered now was that he'd said that she was finally perfect. That she must never change. He came to her, he said, to leave the world behind. To escape into her beauty. Bernardo was *so* poetic. That had been a comfort at first.

He had also locked her out of the infofeed. She couldn't get news or watch shows or play the latest sims. Or call for help. Of course, she had the entire Norton entertainment archive to keep her company, although lots of it was too adult for her. She just didn't *get* Henry James or Brenda Bop or Alain Resnais. But she liked Jane Austen and Renoir and Buster Keaton and Billie Holliday and Petchara Songsee and the 2017 Red Sox. She *loved* to read about houses. But there was nothing in her archive after 2038 and she was awake twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

What if Bernardo was dead? After all, he'd had the heart attack, just a couple of months before he left. Obviously, if he had died, that would be the end of her. Some new owner would wipe her memory and swap in a new body and sell all her furniture. Except Bernardo always said that she was his most precious secret. That no one else in all the world knew about her. About *them*. In which case she'd wait for him for years—*decades*—until her fuel cells were depleted and her consciousness flickered and went dark. The house started to hum some of Bernardo's favorites to push the thought away. He liked the romantics. Chopin and Mendelssohn. *Hmm-hm, hm-hm-hm-hm*-hm! "The Wedding March" from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

No, she wasn't bored.

Not really.

Or angry, either.

She spent her days thinking about him, not in any methodical way, but as if he had been shattered into a thousand pieces and she was trying to put him back together. She imagined this must be what dreaming was like, although, of course, she couldn't dream because she wasn't real. She was just a house. She thought of the stubble on his chin scratching her breasts and the scar on his chest and the time he laughed at something

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she said and the way his neck muscles corded when he was angry. She had come to realize that it was always a mistake to ask him about the outside. Always. But he enjoyed his bromeliads and his music helped him forget his troubles at the hospital, whatever they were, and he loved her. *He was always asking her to read to him. He would sit for hours, staring up at the clouds on the ceiling, listening to her. She liked that better than sex, although having sex with him always aroused her. It was part of her design. His foreplay was gentle and teasing. He would nip at her ear with his lips, trace her eyebrows with his finger. Although he was a big man, he had a feather touch. Once he had his penis in her, though, it was more like a game than the lovemaking she had read about in books. He would tease her—stop and then go very fast. He liked blindfolds and straps and honeypins. Sometimes he'd actually roll off one side of the bed, stroll to the other and come at her again, laughing. She wondered if the real people he had sex with enjoyed being with him.*

One thing that puzzled her was why he was so shy about the words. He always said vagina and anus, intercourse and fellatio. Of course, she knew all the other words; they were in the books she read when he wasn't around. Once, when he had just started to undress her, she asked if he wanted her to suck his cock. He looked as if he wanted to slap her. "Don't you ever say that to me again," he said. "There's enough filth in the real world. It has to be different here."

She decided that was a very romantic thing for him to say to . . .

And suddenly a year had passed. The house could not say where it had gone, exactly. A whole year, *misplaced*. How careless! She must do something or else it would happen again. Even though she was perfect for him, she had to make some changes. She decided to rearrange furniture.

Her concrete coffee table was too heavy for her to budge so she dragged her two elephant cushions from the playroom and tipped them against it. The ensemble formed a charming little courtyard. She pulled all her drawers out of her dresser in her bedroom and set them sailing on her lap pool. She liked the way they bucked and bumped into one another when she turned her jets on. She had never understood why Bernardo had bought four kitchen chairs, if it was just supposed to be the two of them, but *never mind*. She overrode the defaults on her clothes processor and entered the measurements of her chairs. She made the cutest lace chemises for two of them and slipped them side-by-side in Bernardo's bed—but facing chastely away from each other. Something tingled at the edge of her consciousness, like a leaky faucet or ants in her bread drawer or . . .

Her motion detectors blinked. Someone had just passed her main gate. *Bernardo*.

With a thrill of horror she realized that all her lights were on. She didn't think they could be seen from outside but still, Bernardo would be furious with her. She was supposed to be his secret getaway. And what would he say when he saw her like this? The reunion she had waited for—*longed for*—would be ruined. And all because she had been weak. She had to put things right. The drawers first. One of them had become waterlogged and had sunk. Suppose she had been washing them? Yes, he

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might believe that. Haul the elephant cushions back into the playroom. Come on, come *on*. There was no time. He'd be through the door any second. What was keeping him?

She checked her gate cams. At first she thought they had malfunctioned. She couldn't see him—or anyone. Her main gate was concealed in the cleft of what looked like an enormous boulder that Bernardo had had fabricated in Toledo, Ohio in 2037. The house panned down its length until she saw a girl taking her shirt off at the far end of the cleft.

She looked to be twelve or maybe thirteen, but still on the shy side of puberty. She was skinny and pale and dirty. Her hair was a brown tangle. She wasn't wearing a bra and didn't need one; her yellow panties were decorated with blue hippos. The girl had built a smoky fire and was trying to dry her clothes over it. She must have been caught in a rainstorm. The house never paid attention to weather but now she checked. Twenty-two degrees Celsius, wind out of the southeast at eleven kilometers per hour, humidity 69 percent. A muggy evening in July. The girl reached into a camo backpack, pulled out a can of beets and opened it.

The house studied her with a fierce intensity. Bernardo had told her that there were no other houses like her on the mountain and he was the only person who had ever come up her side. The girl chewed with her mouth open. She had tiny ears. Her nipples were brown as chocolate.

After a while the girl resealed the can of beets and put it away. She had eaten maybe half of it. The house did a quick calculation and decided that she had probably consumed three hundred calories. How often did she eat? Not often enough. The skin stretched taut against her ribs as the girl put her shirt on. Her pants clung to her, not quite dry. She drew a ragged, old snugsack from the pack, ballooned it and then wriggled in. It was dark now. The girl watched the fire go out for about an hour and then lay down.

It was the longest night of the house's life. She rearranged herself to her defaults and ran her diagnostics. She vacuumed her couch and washed all her floors and defrosted a chicken. She watched the girl sleep and replayed the files of when she had been awake. The house was so lonely and the poor little thing was clearly distressed.

She could help the girl.

Bernardo would be mad.

Where was Bernardo?

In the morning the girl would pack up and leave. But if the house let her go, she was not sure what would happen next. When she thought about all those dresser drawers floating in her lap pool, her lights flickered. She wished she could remember what had happened the day Bernardo left but those files were gone.

Finally she decided. She programmed a black lace inset corset with ribbon and beading trim. Garters attached to scallop lace-top stockings. She hydrated a rasher of bacon, preheated her oven, mixed cranberry muffin batter and filled her coffee pot with French roast. She thought hard about whether she should read or watch a vid. If she were reading, she could listen to music. She printed a hardcopy of *Ozma of Oz,* but what to play? Chopin? Too dreamy. Wagner? Too scary. *Grieg,* yes. Something that

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would reach out and grab the girl by the tail of her grimy shirt. "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from *Peer Gynt*.

She opened herself, turned up her hall lights in welcome and waited.

Just after dawn the girl rolled over and yawned. The house popped muffins into her oven and bacon into her microwave. She turned on her coffee pot and the Grieg. Basses and bassoons tiptoed cautiously around her living room and out her door. *Dum-dum-dum-da*-dum-*da-dum*. The girl started and then flew out of the snugsack faster than the house had ever seen anyone move. She crouched facing the house's open door, holding what looked like a pulse gun with the grip broken off.

"Spang me," she said. "Fucking spang me."

The house wasn't sure how to reply, so she said nothing. A mob of violins began to chase Peer Gynt around the Mountain King's Hall as the girl hesitated in the doorway. A moan of pleasure caught in the back of the house's throat. Oh, oh, *oh*—to be with a real person again! She thought of how Bernardo would rub his penis against her labia, not quite entering her. That was what it felt like to the house as the girl edged into her front hall, back against her wall. She pointed her pulse gun into the living room and then peeked around the corner. When she saw the house's body sitting on her couch, the girl's eyes grew as big as eggs. The house pretended to be absorbed in her book, although she was watching the girl watching her through her rover cams. The house felt *beautiful* for the first time since Bernardo left. It was all she could do to keep from hugging herself! As the Grieg ended in a paroxysm of screeching strings and thumping kettle drums, the house looked up.

"Why, hello," she said, as if surprised to see that she had a visitor. "You're just in time for breakfast."

"Don't move." The girl's face was hard.

"All right." She smiled and closed *Ozma of Oz*.

With a snarl, the girl waved the pulse gun at her Aritomo floor lamp. Blue light arced across the space and her poor Aritomo went numb. The house winced as the circuit breaker tripped. "*Ow*."

"Said don't . . ." The girl aimed the pulse gun at her, its batteries screaming. ". . . move. Who the bleeding weewaw are you?"

The house felt the tears coming; she was thrilled. "I'm the house." She had felt more in the last minute than she had in the last year. "Bernardo's house."

"Bernardo?" She called, "Bernardo, show your ass."

"He left." The house sighed. "Two . . . no, *three* years ago."

"Spang if that true." She sidled into the room and brushed a finger against the dark cosmic dust filaments that laced the center of the Swan Nebula on the wallscape. "What smell buzzy good?"

"I told you." The house reset the breaker but her Aritomo stayed dark. "Breakfast."

"Bernardo's breakfast?"

"Yours."

"My?" The girl filled the room with her twitchy energy.

"You're the only one here."

"Why you dressed like cheap meat?"

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The house felt a stab of doubt. Cheap? She was wearing *black lace,* from the *de Chaumont* collection! She rested a hand at her décolletage. "This is the way Bernardo wants me."

"You a fool." The girl picked up the eighteenth century Zuni water jar from the Nottingham highboy, shook it and then sniffed the lip. "Show me that breakfast."

Six cranberry muffins.

A quarter kilo of bacon.

Three cups of scrambled ovos.

The girl washed it all down with a tall glass of gel Ojay and a pot of coffee. She seemed to relax as she ate, although she kept the pulse gun on the table next to her and she didn't say a word to the house. The house felt as if the girl was judging her. She was confused and a little frightened to see herself through the girl's eyes. Could pleasing Bernardo really be foolish? Finally she asked if she might be excused. The girl grunted and waved her off.

The house rushed to the bedroom, wriggled out of the corset and crammed it into the recycling slot of the clothes processor. She scanned all eight hundred pages of the wardrobe menu before fabricating a stretch navy-blue jumpsuit. It was cut to the waist in the back and was held together by a web of spaghetti straps but she covered up with a periwinkle jacquard kimono with the collar flipped. She turned around and around in front of the mirror, so amazed that she could barely find herself. She looked like a nun. The only skin showing was on her face and hands. Let the girl stare now!

The girl had pushed back from the table but had not yet gotten up. She had a thoughtful but pleased look, as if taking an inventory of everything she had eaten.

"Can I bring you anything else?" said the house.

The girl glanced up at her and frowned. "Why you change clothes? Cause of me?"

"I was cold."

"You was naked. You know what happens to naked?" She made a fist with her right hand and punched the palm of her left. "Bin-bin-bin-*bam*. They take you, whether you say yes or no. Not fun."

The house thought she understood, but wished she didn't. "I'm sorry."

"You be sweat sorry, sure." The girl laughed. "What your name?"

"I told you. I'm Bernardo's house."

"Spang that. You Louise."

"Louise?" The house blinked. "Why Louise?"

"Not know Louise's story?" The girl clearly found this a failing on the house's part. "Most buzzy." She tapped her forefinger to the house's nose. "Louise." Then the girl touched her own nose. "Fly."

For a moment, the house was confused. "That's not a girl's name."

"Sure, not girl, not boy. Fly is *Fly*." She tucked the pulse gun into the waistband of her pants. "Nobody wants Fly, but then nobody catches Fly." She stood. "Buzzy-buzz. Now we find Bernardo."

"But . . ."

But what was the point? Let the girl—Fly—see for herself that Bernar-

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do wasn't home. Besides the house longed to be looked at. Admired. Used. In Bernardo's room, Fly stretched out under the canopy of the Ergotech bed and gazed up at the moonlit clouds drifting across the underside of the valence. She clambered up the Gecko climbing wall in the gym and picked strawberries in the greenhouse. She seemed particularly impressed by the Piero scent palette, which she discovered when the house filled her jacuzzi with jasmine water. She had the house—Louise—give each room a unique smell. Bernardo had had a very low tolerance for scent; he said there were too many smells at the hospital. He even made the house vent away the aromas of her cooking. Once in a while he might ask for a whiff of campfire smoke or the nose of an old Côtes de Bordeaux, but he would never mix scents across rooms. Fly had Louise breathe roses into the living room and seashore into the gym and onions frying in the kitchen. The onion smell made the girl hungry again so she ate half of the chicken that Louise had roasted for her.

Fly spent the afternoon in the playroom, browsing Louise's entertainment archive. She watched a Daffy Duck cartoon and a Harold Lloyd silent called *Girl Shy* and the rain delay episode from *Jesus on First*. She seemed to prefer comedy and happy endings and had no use for ballet or Westerns or rap. She balked at wearing spex or strapping on an airflex, so she skipped the sims. Although she had never learned to read, she told Louise that a woman named Kuniko used to read her fairy tales. Fly asked if Louise knew any and she hardcopied *Grimm's Household Tales* in the 1884 translation by Margaret Hunt and read "Little Briar-Rose."

Which was one of Bernardo's favorite fairy tales. Mostly he liked his fiction to be about history. Sailors and cowboys and kings. War and politics. He had no use for mysteries or love stories or science fiction. But every so often he would have her read a fairy tale and then he would try to explain it. He said fairy tales could have many meanings, but she usually just got the one. She remembered that the time she had read Briar-Rose to him he was working at his desk, the only intelligent system inside the house that she couldn't access. He was working in the dark and the desk screen cast milky shadows across his face. She was pretty sure he wasn't listening to her. She wanted to spy over his shoulder with one of her rover cams to see what was so interesting.

"And, in the very moment when she felt the prick," she read, "she fell down upon the bed that stood there, and lay in a deep sleep."

Bernardo chuckled.

Must be something he saw on the desk, she thought. Nothing funny about Briar-Rose. "And this sleep extended over the whole palace; the King and Queen who had just come home, and had entered the great hall, began to go to sleep, and the whole of the court with them. The horses, too, went to sleep in the stable, the dogs in the yard, the pigeons upon the roof, the flies on the wall; even the fire that was flaming on the hearth became quiet and slept. And the wind fell, and on the trees before the castle not a leaf moved again. But round about the castle there began to grow a hedge of thorns, which every year became higher, and at last grew close up round the castle and all over it, so that there was nothing of it to be seen, not even the flag upon the roof."

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"Pay attention," said Bernardo.

"Me?" said the house.

"You." Bernardo tapped the desk screen and it went dark. She brought the study lights up.

"That will happen one of these days," he said.

"What?"

"I'll be gone and you'll fall fast asleep."

"Don't say things like that, Bernardo."

He crooked a finger and she slid her body next to him.

"You're hopeless," he said. "That's what I love about you." He leaned into her kiss.

"And then the marriage of the King's son with Briar-rose was celebrated with all splendor," the house read, "and they lived contented to the end of their days."

"Heard it different," said Fly "With nother name, not Briar-Rose." She yawned and stretched. "Heard it *Betty*."

"Betty Rose?"

"Plain Betty."

The house was eager to please. "Would you like another? Or we could see an opera. I have over six hundred interactive games that you don't need to suit up for. Poetry? The Smithsonian? Superbowls I-LXXVIII?"

"No more jabber. Boring now." Fly peeled herself from the warm embrace of the Kukuru chair and stretched. "Still hiding somewhere."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Fly caught the house's body by the arm and dragged her through herself, calling out the names of her rooms. "Play. Living. Dining. Kitchen. Study. Gym. Bed. Nother bed. Plants." Fly spun Louise in the front hall and pointed. "Door?"

"Right." The house was out of breath. "Door. You've seen all there is to see."

"One door?" The girl's smile was as agreeable as a fist. "Fly buzzy with food now, but not stupid. Where you keep stuff? Heat? Electric? Water?"

"You want to see *that*?"

Fly let go of Louise's arm. "Dink yeah."

The house didn't much care for her basement and she never went down unless she had to. It was *ugly*. Three harsh rows of ceiling lights, a couple of bilious green pumps, the squat power plant and the circuit breakers and all that multiconductor cable! She didn't like listening to her freezer hum or smelling the naked cement walls or looking at the scars where the forms had been stripped away after her foundation had been poured.

"Bernardo?" Fly's voice echoed across the expanse of the basement. "Cut that weewaw, Bernardo."

"Believe me, there's nothing here." The house waited on the stairs as the girl poked around. "Please don't touch any switches," she called.

"Where that go?" Fly pointed at the heavy duty, ribbed, sectional overhead door.

"A tunnel," said the house, embarrassed by the rawness of her 16 gauge steel. "It comes out farther down the mountain near the road. At the end there's another door that's been shotcreted to look like stone."

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"What scaring Bernardo?"

Bernardo scared? The thought had never even occurred to the house. Bernardo was not the kind of man who would be scared of anything. All he wanted was privacy so he could be alone with her. "I don't know," she said.

Fly was moving boxes stacked against the wall near the door. Several contained bolts of spuncloth for the clothes processor, others were filled with spare lights, fertilizer, flour, sugar, oil, raw vitabulk, vials of flavor and food coloring. Then she came to the wine, a couple of hundred bottles of vintage Bordeaux and Napa and Maipo River, some thrown haphazardly into old boxes, other stacked near the wall.

"Bernardo drink most wine," said Fly.

Louise was confused by this strange cache but before she could defend Bernardo, Fly found the second door behind two crates of toilet paper.

"Where *that* go?"

The house felt as if the entire mountain were pressing down on her roof. The door had four panels, two long on top and two short on the bottom, and looked to be made of oak, although that didn't mean anything. She fought the crushing weight of the stone with all her might. She thought she could hear her bearing walls buckle, her mind crack. She zoomed her cams on the bronze handleset. Someone would need a key to open that door. But there were no keys! And just who would that someone be?

The house had never seen the door before.

Fly jiggled the handleset, but the door was locked. "Bernardo." She put her face to the door and called. "Hey you."

The house ran a check of her architectural drawings, although she knew what she would find. The girl turned to her and waved the house over. "Louise, how you open this weewaw?"

Her plans showed no door.

The girl rapped on the door.

The house's thoughts turned to stone.

When she woke up, her body was on her Epping couch. The jacquard kimono was open and the spaghetti straps that drew her jumpsuit tight were undone. The house had never woken up before. Oh, she had lost that year, but still she had blurry memories of puttering around the kitchen and vacuuming and lazing in her Kukuru chair reading romances and porn. But this was the first time she had ever been nothing and nowhere since the day Bernardo had turned her on.

"You okay?" Fly knelt by her and rested a hand lightly on the house's forehead to see if she were running a fever. The house melted under the girl's touch. She reached up and guided Fly's hand slowly down the side of her face to her lips. When Fly did not resist, Louise kissed the girl's fingers.

"How old are you?" said Louise.

"Thirteen." Fly gazed down on her, concern tangling with suspicion.

"Two years older than I am." Louise chuckled. "I could be your little sister."

"You dropped, bin-bam and *down*." The girl's voice was thick. "Scared

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me. Lights go out and nothing work." Fly pulled her hand back. "Thought maybe you dead. And me locked in."

"Was I out long?"

"Dink yeah. Felt like most a day."

"Sorry. That's never happened before."

"You said, touch no switch. So door is switch?"

At the mention of the *door, there was no door, look at the door, no door there,* the house's vision started to dim and the room grew dark. "I-I . . ."

The girl put her hands on the house's shoulder and shook her. "Louise what? *Louise.*"

The house felt circuit breakers snap. She writhed with the pain and bit down hard on her lip. "*No,*" she cried and sat up, arms flailing. "*Yes.*" It came out as a hiss and then she was blinking against the brightness of reality.

Fly was pointing the pulse gun at Louise but her hand was not steady. She had probably figured out that zapping the house wouldn't help at all. A shut-down meant a lock-down and the girl had already spent one day in the dark. Louise raised a hand to reassure her and tried to cover her own panic with a smile. It was a tight fit. "I'm better now."

"Better." Fly tucked the gun away. "Not good?"

"Not good, no," said the house. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

The girl paced around the couch. "Listen," she said finally. "Front door, *front.* Door I came in, okay? Open that weewaw."

The house nodded. "I can do that." She felt stuffy and turned her air recirculators up. "But I can't leave it open. I'm not allowed. So if you want to go, maybe you should go now."

"Go? Go where?" The girl laughed bitterly. "Here is buzzy. World is spang."

"Then you should stay. I very much want you to stay. I'll feed you, tell you stories. You can take a bath and play in the gym and watch vids and I can make you new clothes, whatever you want. I need someone to take care of. It's what I was made for." As Louise got off the couch, the living room seemed to tilt but then immediately righted itself. The lights in the gym and the study clicked back on. "There are just some things that we can't talk about."

Days went by.

Then weeks.

Soon it was months.

After bouncing off each other at first, the house and the girl settled into a routine of eating and sleeping and playing the hours away—mostly together. Louise could not decide what about Fly pleased her the most. Certainly she enjoyed cooking for the girl, who ate an amazing amount for someone her size. Bernardo was a picky eater. At his age, he had to watch his diet and there were some things he would never have touched, even before the heart attack, like cheese and fish and garlic. After a month of devouring three meals and two snacks a day, the girl was filling out nicely. The chickens were gone, but Fly loved synthetics. Louise could no longer count the girl's ribs. And she thought the girl's breasts were starting to swell.

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Louise had only visited the gym to dust before the girl arrived. Now the two of them took turns on the climbing wall and the gyro and the trampoline, laughing and urging each other to try new tricks. Fly couldn't swim, so she never used the lap pool, but she loved the jacuzzi. The first few times she had dunked with all her clothes on. Finally Louise hit upon a strategy to coax her into a demure bandeau bathing suit. She imported pictures of hippos from her archive to the clothes processor to decorate the suit. After that, all the pajamas and panties and bathing suits that Fly fabricated had hippo motifs.

The house was tickled by the way Fly became a clothes processor convert. At first she flipped through the house's wardrobe menus without much interest. The jumpsuits were all too tight and she had no patience whatsoever for skirts and dresses. The rest of it was either too stretchy, too skimpy, too short or too thin. "Good for weewaw," she said, preferring to wear the ratty shirt and pants and jacket that she had arrived in. But Fly was thrilled with the shoes. She never seemed to tire of designing sandals and slingbacks and mules and flats and jammers. She was particularly proud of her Cuthbertsons, a half boot with an oblique toe and a narrow last. She made herself pairs in aqua and mauve and faux snakeskin.

It was while Fly was exploring shoe menus that she clicked from a page of women's loafers to a page of men's, and so stumbled upon Bernardo's clothing menus. Louise heard a cackle of delight and hurried to the bedroom to see what was happening. Fly was dancing in front of the screen. "Really real pants," she said, pointing. "Real pants don't fall open bin-bin-*bam*." She started wearing jeans and digbys and fleece and sweatshirts with hoods and pullovers. One day she emerged from the bedroom in an olive-check silk sportcoat and matching driving cap. Seeing Fly in men's clothes made the house feel self-conscious about her own wardrobe of sexware. Soon she too was choosing patterns from Bernardo's menus. The feel of a chamois shirt against her skin reminded the house of her lost love. Once, in a guilty moment, she wondered what he might think if he walked in on them. But then Fly asked Louise to read her a story and she put Bernardo out of mind.

Although they spent many hours sampling vids together, Louise was happiest reading to Fly. They would curl up together in the Kukuru and the girl would turn the pages as the house read. Of course, they started with hippos: *Hugo the Hippo* and *Hungo the Hippo* and *The Hippo Had Hiccups*. Then *There's a Hippopotamus Under My Bed* and *Hip, Hippo, Hooray* and all of the Peter Potamus series. Sometimes Fly would play with Louise's hair while she read, braiding and unbraiding it, or else she would absently press Louise's fingernails like they were keys on a keyboard. One night, just two months after she'd come to the house, the girl fell asleep while the house was reading her *Chocolate Chippo Hippo*. It was as close to orgasm as the house had been since she had been with Bernardo. She was tempted to kiss the girl but settled for spending the night with her arms around her. The hours ticked slowly as the house gazed down at Fly's peaceful face. She watched the girl's eyes move beneath her lids as she dreamed.

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The house wished she could sleep.

If only she could dream.

What was it like to be real?

Bernardo was never himself again after the heart attack. Of course, he said he was fine. Fine. *He probably wouldn't even have told her except for the sternotomy scar, an angry purple-red pucker on his chest. When he first came back to her, five weeks after his triple bypass operation, she could tell he was struggling. It was partly the sex. Normally he would have taken her to bed for the entire first day. Although he kissed her neck and caressed her breasts and told her he loved her, it was almost a week before she coaxed him into sex. She was wild to have his penis in her vagina, to taste his ejaculation; that was how he'd had her designed. But their lovemaking wasn't the same. Sometimes his breath caught during foreplay, as if someone was sitting on him. So she did most of the squirming and licking and sucking. Not that she minded. He watched her—mouth set, toes curled. He could stay just as erect as before, but she knew he was taking pills for that. Once when she was guiding him into her, he gave a little grunt of pain.*

"Are you all right?" she said.

He gave no answer but instead pushed deep all at once; she shivered *with delight. But as he thrust at her, she realized that he was* working, *not playing. They weren't sharing pleasure; he was* giving *it and she was* taking *it. Afterward, he fell asleep almost immediately. No kisses, no cuddles. No stories. The house was left alone with her thoughts. Bernardo had changed, yes. He* could *change, and she must always be the same. That was the difference between being a real person and being a house.*

He spent more time in the greenhouse than in bed, rearranging his bromeliads. His favorites were the tank types, the Neoregelias *with their gaudy leaves and the* Aechmeas *with their alien inflorescences. He liked to pot them in tableaus: Washington Crossing the Delaware, The Last Supper. Bernardo preferred to be alone with his plants, and she pretended to honor his wish, although her rover cam lurked behind the* Schefflera. *So she saw him slump against the potting bench on that last day. She thought he was having another attack.*

"Bernardo!" she cried over the room speaker as she sent her body careening toward the greenhouse. "My god, Bernardo. What is it?"

When she got to him, she could see that his shoulders were shaking. She leaned him back. His eyes were shiny. "Bernardo?" She touched a tear that ran down his face.

"When I had you built," he said, "all I wanted was to be the person who deserved to live here. But I'm not anymore. Maybe I never was." His eyelid drooped and the corner of his mouth curved in an odd frown.

"Louise, wake up!" Someone was shaking her.

The house opened her eyes and powered up all her cams at once. "What?" The first thing she saw was Fly staring up at her, clearly worried.

"You sleeptalking." The girl took the house's hand in both of hers. "Saying 'Bernardo, Bernardo.' Real sad."

"I don't sleep."

"Spang you don't. What you just doing?"

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"I . . . I was thinking."

"About him?"

"Let's have breakfast."

"What happened to him?" said Fly. "Where *is* Bernardo?"

The house had to change the topic somehow. In desperation she filled the room with bread scent and put on the Wagner's *Prelude to Die Meistersinger*. It was sort of a march. Actually, more a processional. Anyway, they needed to move. Or *she* did. *La*-lum-*la-la, li-li-li-li-la-la*-lum-*la.*

Let's talk about you, Fly.

No, really.

But why not?

At first, Fly had refused to say anything about her past, but she couldn't help but let bits of the story slip. As time passed and she felt more secure, she would submit to an occasional question. The house was patient and never pressed the girl to say more than she wanted. So it took time for the house to piece together Fly's story.

Sometime around 2038, as near as the house could tell, a computer virus choked off the infofeed for almost a month. The virus apparently repurposed much of the Midwest's computing resources to perform a single task. Fly remembered a time when every screen she saw was locked on its message: *Bang, you're dead*. Speakers blared it, phones rasped it, thinkmates whispered it into earstones. *Bang, you're dead*. Fly was still living in the brown house with white shutters in Sarcoxie with her mother, whose name was Nikki, and her father, Jerry, who had a tattoo of a hippo on each arm. Her father had worked as a mechanic for Sarcoxie RentalCars 'N More. But although the screens came back on, Sarcoxie RentalCars 'N More never reopened. Her father said that there was no work anywhere in the Ozarks. They lived in the brown house for awhile but then there was no food so they had to leave. She remembered that they got on a school bus and lived in a big building where people slept on the floor and there were always lines for food and the bathrooms smelled a bad kind of sweet and then they sent her family to tents in the country. They must have been staying near a farm because she remembered chickens and sometimes they had scrambled eggs for dinner but then there was a fire and people were shooting bullets and she got separated from her parents and nobody would tell her where they were and then she was with Kuniko, an old woman who lived in a dead Dodge Caravan and next to it was another car she had filled with cans of fried onions and chow mein and creamed corn and Kuniko was the one who told her the fairy tales but that winter it got very cold and Kuniko died and Happy Man took her away. He did things to her she was never going to talk about although he did give her good things to eat. Happy Man said people were working again and the infofeed had grown much wider and things were getting back to normal. Fly thought that meant her father would come to rescue her but finally she couldn't wait any more so she zapped Happy Man with his pulse gun and took some of his stuff and ran and ran and ran until Louise had let her in.

Hearing the girl's story helped the house understand some things about Bernardo. He must have left her just after the *Bang, you're dead*

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virus had first struck. He had turned off the infofeed so she wouldn't be infected. How brave of him to go back to the chaos of the world in his condition! He would save lives at the hospital, no doubt about that. She ought to be proud of him. Only why hadn't he come back, now that things were better? Had she done something to drive him away for good? And why couldn't she remember him leaving? Slipping reluctantly out the front door, turning for one last smile.

It was several days after Fly had fallen asleep in Louise's lap that they had their first fight. It was over Bernardo. Or rather his things. The house had tried to respect the privacy of Bernardo's study. Although she read some of his files over his shoulder, she had never thought to break the encryption on his desktop. And while she had been through most of his desk drawers, there was one that was locked that she had never tried to open.

Louise was in her kitchen, making lunch, but she was also following Fly with one of her rover cams. The girl had wandered into the study. The house was astonished to see her lift his diploma from Dartmouth Medical School and look at the wall behind it. She did the same to the picture of Bernardo shaking hands with the Secretary-General, then she plopped into his desk chair. She opened the trophy case and handled Bernardo's swimming medals from Duke. She picked up the Lasker trophy, which he won for research into the role of DNA methylation in endometrial cancer. It was a small golden winged victory perched on a teak base. She rolled around the room in the chair, waving it and making crow sounds. *Caw-caw-caw*. Then she put the Lasker down again—in the wrong place! In the top drawer of Bernardo's desk was the Waltham pocket watch his grandfather had left him. She shook it and listened for ticking. His Myaki thinkmate was in the bottom drawer. She popped the earstone in and said something to the CPU but quickly seemed to lose interest in its reply. Louise wanted to rush into the study to stop this violation, but was paralyzed by her own shocked fascination. The girl was a real person and could obviously do things that the house would never think of doing.

Nevertheless, Louise disapproved at lunch. "I don't like you going through Bernardo's desk. That's weewaw."

Fly almost choked on her cream cheese and jelly sandwich. "What you just said?"

"I don't like . . ."

"You said weewaw. Why you talking spang mouth like Fly?"

"I like the way you talk. It's buzzy."

"Fly talks like Fly." She pushed her plate away. "Louise must talk like house." She pointed a finger at Louise. "You spying me now?"

"I saw you in the study, yes."

Fly leaned across the table. "You spy Bernardo the same?"

"No," she lied, "Of course not."

"Slack him, not me?"

"I'm Bernardo's house, Fly. I told you that the first day."

"You Louise now." She came around the table and tugged at the house's chair. "Come." She steered her to the front hall. "Open door."

"Why?"

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"We go out now. Look up sky."

"No, Fly, you don't understand."

"Most understand." She put a hand on the house's shoulder. "Buzzy outside, Louise." Fly smiled. "Come on."

It made the house woozy to leave herself, as if she were in two places at once. Bernardo had brought her outside just the once. He seemed relieved that she didn't like it. She had forgotten that outside was so *big!* So *bright!* There was so much *air!* She shielded her eyes with her hand and turned her gate cams up to their highest resolution.

Fly settled on a long, flat rock, one of the weathered bones of the mountain. She tucked her legs beneath her. "Now comes Louise's story." She pointed at the rock next to her. "Fairy tale Louise."

Louise sat. "All right."

"Once on time," said the girl, "Louise lives in that castle. Louise's Mom dies, don't say where her Dad goes. So Louise stuck with spang bitch taking care of her. That Louise castle got no door, only windows high and high. Now Louise got most hair." Fly spread her arms wide. "Hair big as trees. When spang bitch want in, she call Louise. *'Louise, Louise, let down buzzy hair.'* Then spang bitch climb it up."

"Rapunzel," said the house. "Her name was Rapunzel."

"Is *Louise* now." The girl shook her head emphatically. "You know it then? Prince comes and tells Louise run away from spang bitch and they live buzzy always after?"

"You brought me outside to tell me a fairy tale?"

"Dink no." Fly reached into the pocket of her flannel shirt. "Cause of you go fainting, we both safe here outside."

"Who said anything about fainting?"

The girl brought something out of her pocket in a closed fist. The house felt a chill, but there was no way to adjust the temperature of the entire *world*.

"Fly, what?"

She held the fist out to Louise. "Door in basement, you know?" She opened it to reveal a key. "Spang door? It opens."

The house immediately started all her rover cams for the basement. "Where did you find that?"

"In Bernardo's desk."

The house could hear the tick of nanoseconds as the closest cam crawled maddeningly down the stairs. Maybe real people could open doors like that, but not Louise. It seemed like an eternity before she could speak. "And?"

"You thinking Bernardo dead down there," said the girl. "Locked in behind that door where all that wine should be."

For the first time she realized that the world was making noises. The wind whispered in the leaves and some creature was going *chit-chit-chit* and she wasn't sure whether it was a bird or a grasshopper and she didn't really care because at that moment the rover cam turned and saw the door. . . .

"But you closed it again." The house shivered. "Why? What did you see?"

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Fly stared at Louise. "Nothing."

The house knew it was a lie. "Tell me."

"No fucking thing." Fly closed her fist around the key again. "Bernardo been *your* spang bitch. So now run away from him." She came over to Louise and hugged her. "Live buzzy after always with me."

"I'm a house," said Louise. "How can I run away?"

"Not run away there." The girl gestured dismissively at the woods. "World is spang." She stood on tiptoes and rested a finger between Louise's eyes. "Run away here." She nodded. "In your head."

She brought his dinner to the study, although she didn't know why exactly. He hadn't moved. Mist rose off the lake on his wallscape; the Alps surrounding it glowed in the serene waters. Chopin's Adieu Etude *filled the room with its sublime melancholy. It had been playing over and over again since she had first come upon him. She couldn't bring herself to turn it off.*

He had left a book of new poems, Ho Peng Kee's The Edge of the Sky, *face down on the desk. She moved it now and put the ragout in its place. In front of him. Earlier she had taken the key from his desk and brought a bottle of the '28 Haut-Brion up from the wine closet in the basement. It had been breathing for twenty minutes.*

"You took such good care of me," she said.

With a flourish, she lifted the cover from the ragout but he didn't look. His head was back. His empty eyes were fixed on the ceiling. She couldn't believe how, even now, his presence filled the room. Filled her completely.

"I don't know how to live without you, Bernardo," she said. "Why didn't you shut me off? I'm not real; I don't want to have these feelings. I'm just a house."

"Louise!"

The house was dreaming over the makings of spinach lasagna in the kitchen.

"Louise." Fly called again from the playroom. "Come read me that buzzy book again. *Hip, Hip, Hip Hippopotamus*." ○

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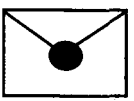

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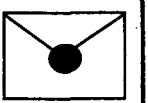

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MORLOCK CHILI

Lawrence Person

Lawrence Person's short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's, Analog, Fear,* and several anthologies. He also edits the Hugo-nominated SF critical magazine Nova Express, and is a member of the long-running Turkey City Writer's Workshop. His web page can be found at: *http://www.io.com/~lawrence.* Mr. Person does fix chili, and he's known for making a mean batch of salsa, too.

Bob Elliot saw the first morlock as he was hauling the PortaStove out of the Winnebago. It was decking out the end-row table old Frank Hanlin had cooked up his Fire Rattler Chili on before retiring to run a dive shop in Cozumel.

"Will you look at that," said Tim Griff at the next table, nodding at the morlock, then turning to spit a stream of tobacco juice into the dust. "Ever see one of them before?"

"Just on TV," said Bob, setting down the stove and taking a look. They weren't really H. G. Wells' far future troglodytes, but with the blue skin, the heavy brows and the huge tusks, the nickname had stuck. With thick pelts of fluffy white hair at their wrists, ankles, and heads, Bob thought they looked more like giant carnivorous poodles. This one wore a three-piece, charcoal gray pinstripe suit and a white dress shirt open down to its chest, despite the fact that the hill country was still hovering around the low nineties in early October, and the morlock's white shirt already seemed to have a strange orange tinge around the edges. It looked considerably ill at ease, which was just fine and dandy as far as Bob was concerned. Anyone stupid enough to wear a suit to a chili cookoff deserved to look ill at ease.

"Why the hell would a morlock want to cook chili?" asked Griff.

Bob shrugged and started hooking up the propane cylinder. "Why the hell do they do anything? All the morlocks *we* see are alien anthropologists or something. That's why they move in and start working day jobs. In Austin one of them played Macbeth at the Paramount."

"Was he any good?"

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"Don't know. Didn't see it. He got bad reviews but the run sold out anyway."

"Well, Shakespeare's one thing, but chili's sacred. I don't see why Peters let 'em in. People don't wanna see freaks like that at a cookoff," said Griff, putting on his papier-mâché bull's head.

"I imagine Peters let it in because it paid the entry fee," said Bob, briefly turning on the stove. The flame was too low so he bent down to check the valve fitting again.

"*Raaaaging Bull Chili, right here!*" shouted Griff.

"Hell, Griff, you ain't even cooked it yet. Why don't you wait until you have something to yell about?"

"Gotta get into character for the Presentation judging."

"Well, do it somewhere else. Besides, you know Little Vicki's gonna win Presentation just like she does every year."

"Sez you. Besides, Little Vicki ain't so little anymore."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that she's put on about forty pounds since last year's Armadillo."

Bob looked up. "That a fact," he said.

"Yep. She ain't wearing her bikini neither."

Bob grunted and checked the flame again. Satisfied at last, he cut it off and started back for the RV to pull out his cookware.

"*Raaaaging Bull Chili!*"

"I said cut that out! When they let in the tasters at three, you can shout your damn fool head off, but until then shut up or my boot's going find the freeway to your ass!"

Crestfallen, Griff went back to fiddling with his spice rack.

After three more trips back to the Winnebago, Bob was ready to start cooking.

Saturday was Charity Day at the Armadillo Hill Country Chili Cookoff. The real judging wouldn't be until Sunday, when real prizes and At Large spots at Terlingua would be at stake. Saturday was just for picking the Charity King or Queen and the Best Presentation winner, both picked by tasters stuffing dollar bills into the appropriate jars. For Presentation, Bob unrolled a portable screen, hung it on the front of his table, and hooked it up to his laptop. Bob's job (ignoring the half-dozen horses on his ranch) was writing computer animation programs, and this year he had put together *The Adventures of Chilehead at the North Pole* as a demonstration project.

As he was heading back to the Winnebago to grab a six pack of Shiner Bock, the second morlock pulled into the space next to his.

For a race that claimed it was trying to fit in, their mode of transportation didn't help. The vehicle was about the size of an RV, but looked like the mutant offspring of a dromedary and a giant dung beetle, with a metallic green chitinous shell and two lopsided humps on top. Supposedly morlocks needed more nitrogen than Earth's atmosphere provided, so they had to sleep in their own environment to replenish themselves. The side door unpuckered with a sucking sound, and out stepped a morlock in jeans and a black turtleneck sweater.

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"Hey there, cook man!" it said to Bob, giving him a hairy thumbs-up. "How does it hang?"

"Uh, fine," said Bob.

"This deal is good," it said. It reached into its jeans (which bulged in ways Bob was sure Levi Strauss never intended) and pulled out a piece of paper. "Where would table 226 I be finding?"

Bob pointed back behind the morlock's vehicle. "Down on the far end."

"Groovy!" said the morlock, giving him another thumbs up. "I will be catching with you later!" It disappeared back into the pucker.

Bob shook his head and headed back to the table. If morlocks were inordinately fond of chili, previous news reports seemed to have omitted this fact. Maybe a whole class of them were doing fieldwork for a graduate course in Chili Studies. He popped open a longneck and started adding spices.

He finished cutting the habanero peppers, dumped them in the pot, and took off his nitrile gloves. Back when he had first started cooking chili, he had forgotten to wash his hands before taking off his contacts, and he was *never* going to make *that* mistake again.

It still needed a good hour to simmer before putting in the masa, so he locked his laptop to the table and went off to make social calls on other competitors.

He had been on the circuit for a good ten years and knew most of the old chili hands by sight. Ray Croft was there with his Fixing to Die Chili, and Hank Jaglom still had the motorized plastic arms sticking out of his "Help! I Am In Hell!" chili pot. Tony Ramirez still cooked up Montezuma's Fiery Judgment, but was down one Mexican Jumping Bean, his oldest daughter having gone off to study anthropology at UT.

"Well, look if it ain't Bob Elliot," said a familiar voice, and he turned around to see Vicki Creswith, AKA Little Vicki, lounging behind her usual table with a black velvet banner proclaiming "Little Vicki's Bad Girl Chili: A Little Heat and a Lotta Wicked," including a portrait of herself with devil horns and a bikini. She was sprawled out on a Persian divan rather than the pool chair she had brought last year, her legs crossed under a short, diaphanous skirt, a bare midriff, an embroidered silk bustier, and long hair died a shade of red not found in nature. Her right hand gripped a coconut with a pink umbrella and a long straw sticking out of the top, while a long stalk of celery dangled from her left in the same position that menthol Virginia Slims had occupied in years past.

"Howdy, Vicki!" said Bob, grinning. "You're lookin' good!"

"I'm lookin' like a heifer right before they shove her down the chute is what I'm lookin'."

"Naw, you're still a mighty fine woman," said Bob, and it was true. She had gained some weight, but not forty pounds. Maybe twenty, mostly around the hips.

"Well ain't you a dear for sayin' so? Come give Vicki a kiss." Bob readily complied. "Ever since I quit smokin' I been swellin' up like a dead armadillo on the side of I-10."

"You quit smoking? Good for you!"

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"Yeah, doctor said either give up the cigs or start smokin' em through one of them neck tubes. That sorta gave me a real powerful incentive."

"Where's the bikini?"

"Hon, the bikini don't fit no more. There's only so much modern fabric science can do. If I were to try one of my go-go moves in that bikini, I'd either pass out or give every fourteen-year-old boy at the cookoff the thrill of his life."

"So, no dancing this year?"

"No go-go dancin'," she said, standing up. "What I'm gonna be doin' is belly dancin'. For belly dancin', it don't matter none if you've got a big butt. Check it out," she said, then went into some of her belly dancing moves while Bob watched appreciatively.

"Girl, you've still got it."

She laughed and poked him in the stomach with the celery stick. "You're just tryin' to get you some, aren't you?"

"Yes ma'am, I am. It also happens to be true."

"Well you keep talkin' like that and you just might succeed."

"What are you doing after the contest tonight?"

"My cousin Becky and her husband live over in Llano, and they're takin' me out to eat at some BBQ joint. I should be back by ten. If ya' want, bring some Shiner over to Lot 138 then and we'll talk over old times."

"Still in the old silver Airstream?"

"Yeah, same one."

"You've got it."

"Oh shit!" she said suddenly, rushing to her crock pot. "I've gotta add the garlic. Shoulda done that two minutes ago. I'll catch up with you later, Bob."

On the way back to his own table, he saw that a crowd of cookoff contestants had formed around the first morlock. They seemed more interested in having their pictures taken with it than trying its chili.

"Hey, Bob," said Red Baxter, who stepped away just after his photo was snapped. "You said hello to Argalaud here yet?"

"Can't say as I have."

"Well here, let me introduce you. Argalaud, this here's Bob Elliot, an old chili hand."

"I am very pleased to meet you," said the morlock, extending a hand. Bob shook after only the barest of hesitations. "Nice to meet you, too," he said, then gritted his teeth as the morlock shook back. Giant poodle or not, the sucker was *strong*.

"Guess you're new to the chili circuit," said Bob, realizing it was a damn fool thing to say the moment it was out of his mouth.

"Yes, this is only my second cookoff. I did attend one in Nacogdoches last month. Would you like to try some chili?"

"Sure," said Bob, scooping out a plastic spoonful before he could think better of it. He was relieved to find that it *was* chili, not some inedible alien concoction, but it was pretty wimpy and insipid chili. "Not a bad start, but I like mine hotter."

Argalaud nodded gravely. "Many people have told me this. I will have to look into options for making it hotter for future batches."

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"No problem. But if you don't mind me asking, why are you here in the cookoff? I mean, I don't suppose you have chili on your planet."

"No. Our foods are far different from yours, and my taste buds had to be modified to taste Terran food properly. However, a culture's cuisine says many things about it, and a food that some find intensely pleasurable, but others intensely painful, has an obvious attraction for someone studying your world."

Bob nodded. "I can see that. By the way, you speak English a lot better than your buddy."

Argalaud blinked. "Buddy? What buddy?"

"Why, the other morlock," said Bob, then immediately regretted it, remembering that "morlock" was supposedly derogatory. But try as he might, he couldn't remember how to pronounce the "proper" name for the alien race, some ungodly thing with ten or twelve syllables of glottal groans and pulsating hisses. *Open mouth, insert boot.* "I mean, the other member of your race, here at the cookoff."

At that, the hair around Argalaud's neck visibly bristled. "I was not aware that any of my compatriots were here. Where might I find them?"

"Uh, Table 226. Go down to the end of this row and hang a right. It will be near the end of that row."

"Thank you very much," said Argalaud, who strode off in that direction.

"What's all that about?" asked Red.

"Heck if I know," said Bob. He started heading back to his own table, but then curiosity got the better of him. He strolled all the way around the far corner, so he was just in time to see the two morlocks get into it.

At least he *assumed* it was an argument, since it was louder than any dozen cat fights combined. Both of them were screaming and hissing at each other, and, side by side, Bob could see that Argalaud was taller and thinner than the other morlock. Argalaud kept pointing at something with metallic yellow skin and way too many legs and antennas in the other morlock's hand. The short morlock just kept shaking his head and waving his free hand. Their hair seemed to bristle out around their clothing, making the cat fight analogy seem that much more apt.

Finally, Argalaud let forth a particularly frightful scream and proceeded to make three quick chopping motions with both hands, then strode angrily away. The other morlock sputtered and hissed for a moment, then shook his head and stalked back to its table, where he promptly and violently dismembered an innocent onion.

At three o'clock sharp, the gate opened up and Griff went into his Raging Bull act again. Bob sighed, got out his headphones, and put on LeAnn Rimes's *Back in the Saddle,* her first album after rehab.

The kids seemed to like *Chilehead at the North Pole,* especially the part where the penguins caught fire. The adults tasted his chili, groaned with delight, fanned their mouths, and put money in his jar. By the time 4:30 rolled around, he had five times as much as Griff did. Griff despondently removed his bull's head and went off to taste some of the other contestants' fare.

A half hour later he was back, flushed with excitement. "Hey, Bob, have you tasted the morlock's chili?"

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"What, Argalaud's wimpy stuff?"

"No, the other one! Grapa-something, the guy in the turtleneck."

"No, why?"

"Because I swear it's the goddamn best chili you ever tasted in your life!"

"Griff, I saw that guy carrying around a giant yellow bug. I ain't gonna eat chili that's got bugs."

"Suit yourself, but, man, you're missing out."

A few minutes later, Red wandered by. "Hey, Bob, you taste Granalana's chili yet?"

Bob eyed him narrowly. "You mean the other morlock?"

"Yeah! Now that boy knows how to make a mean pot of chili!"

"Spicy?" he asked.

"Oh, maybe a little. Not as hot as I usually like it, but flat-out delicious! Best I've ever tasted."

"You seen what's in it?"

"Nope! Don't much care, neither. Anyway, you want some, you better act quick, cause there's a long line and he's fixing to run out."

"I'll just leave some for all the bug lovers out there."

"Whatever. Suit yourself. But I guarantee you, he's going to win the charity prize."

"Says you."

Red's prophecy proved accurate, with Granapalagala (or so the results board read) coming in with more than three times as much charity money as the next highest total. Bob came in seventh in the charity totals and fifth in Presentation. Little Vicki finished second in Presentation behind Jimmy Sanchez's Hot Licks Tejano Guitar.

Bob just didn't know what to make of it. It was bad enough when Californians started winning chili cookoffs, but when rookie carnivorous poodles from outer space started winning them, it was time to think about hanging up your spoons.

"Bob, I don't know why we don't do this more often."

"Because you live in Beaumont and I live near Marble Falls?" he asked, pulling on his boots.

"Well, true love oughta be able to triumph over mere distance."

"Are you trying to say you're madly in love with me?"

Vicki shrugged and hugged her knees. "Well, you're better'n most of the jerks I've slept with."

"Thanks for the overwhelming vote of confidence. You sure know how to sweet-talk a guy."

"You know what I mean. You been awful nice to me, and you ain't said nothing about my big butt all night."

"Honey, you've *still* got a good butt. You may not have a perfect butt anymore, but you've still got a good one."

"Well, if *that* ain't sweet talk I don't know what is."

"Have you seen my gun?"

"I reckon I got a pretty good look at it over the last hour or so."

"No, my Kimber .45, the one in my fanny pack. You know, black nylon bag?"

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"Oh, that thing. I think it's behind the seat there. Why do you carry a gun?"

"Because I've got a concealed carry permit for it," he said, strapping it on. "Also, four or five people had their trailers robbed here a few years ago. Besides, my ranch ain't exactly close to a police station."

"You really have a ranch? You ain't just pullin' my leg?"

"Oh sure, but it ain't a big ranch. About twenty-six acres, half of it scrub. If you want to see it, why don't you come up sometime?"

"I'd like that, Bob, I surely would, if it's no trouble."

"No trouble at all. I'll need someone to help me unload some hay."

She hit him with the pillow. "You want your hay unloaded or you want your ashes hauled? Pick one and *only* one."

"I guess I'll go for the ashes." He kissed her. "See you tomorrow."

Bob was just about to come around his Winnebago when he heard a pounding sound in the next lot. He slowed down, carefully unzipping his fanny pack, then peeked around the corner.

There was just enough light from one of the camp's overhead lights for him to make out Griff pounding on the morlock's trailer.

"Granap!" he said, in a voice that tried to be a whisper but didn't manage it very well. "Granap, open up!"

After a couple more iterations, Granapalagala's door unpuckered and a thoroughly pissed-off morlock glared out. "What want this dead hour, Griff-man?"

"Granap, you got to give me more of that chili! I'm desperate for a taste of it!"

"Chili out! Tomorrow have more! Let me sleep!"

"But I need some now! I can't stop thinkin' about it, I keep tossin' and turnin'."

"No help! Try tomorrow!" The door repuckered.

"I'm willin' to pay ya!"

The door unpuckered.

"Perhaps pain I can ease," said Granap, who suddenly seemed to be a lot more awake. "What money have?"

"I got," Griff dug through his wallet, "Seventy-nine dollars!"

"You lucky my charity feeling," said Granap. "Wait!" After a few seconds of fumbling around inside, he came out, snatched the money from Griff's hands and gave him a tiny glass jar in exchange. Bob saw it flash yellow in the lamplight.

Griff looked at the tiny jar a moment. "This ain't chili!"

"Special ingredient! Taste, but only small!"

Frowning, Griff wetted the tip of his finger, stuck it in the jar, then tasted it. He frowned and smacked his lips for a few minutes, then his face was transformed by the most beatific smile Bob had ever seen.

"Now that," said Griff slowly, "is one hell of a secret ingredient!"

"Thought you like!" said the morlock, patting Griff on the back, causing him to stagger momentarily. "Now you sleep. Night!" At that, Granapalagala stepped back into his vehicle, the door puckering behind him.

What the hell was that, Bob wondered, easing as silently as he could into his own RV. Griff wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but Bob

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had never seen him act like this in all the years he had been on the circuit. He didn't know what to make of it. He shrugged, then took off his boots and clothing, made sure the door was locked, set his alarm, and set his .45 out next to his bunk before lying down.

He was just drifting off to sleep, pleasantly reflecting on Little Vicki's earlier feats of dexterity, when he was rudely jerked awake by another pounding sound on the side of the morlock's vehicle.

Bob cursed under his breath, grabbed his gun and peeked out through the Winnebago's curtained windows. It was Red.

"Granap!" Red whispered. "I need to talk with you! Open the dang door!"

After a few seconds the door unpuckered, and the same scene that had played out with Griff unfolded again. In fact, it happened three more times with other people before Bob got out his shooting ear plugs so he could get a few hours of sleep before he got up to cook.

What the hell was in those critters?

"Morning, Griff."

Griff swiveled a baleful, bloodshot glance in Bob's direction, favored him with a low grunt, then went back to staring into the intermediate distance. He seemed to be wearing the same jeans and red plaid shirt he had worn yesterday, somewhat worse for wear.

"So who you think is going to win the cookoff?"

Griff grunted again.

Bob went on in a similar vein, tormenting Griff with a long string of relentlessly cheerful questions and receiving nothing but monosyllabic monotones in reply, but the novelty wore off after about five minutes. Bob went silent and started seasoning his meat.

About a half hour later, Bob saw Red stagger by. He too seemed to be nursing a hellacious yellow bug hangover, though not as bad as Griff's. Hell, he'd seen Red look worse after a night of Jack Daniels.

By one PM, with temperatures already in the mid-90s, Bob's chili and the surrounding hill country were both about as hot as they were going to get. Argalaud wandered by, saw Bob, and made a beeline for his table.

"Hello, Bob," he said.

"Argalaud."

"How are you doing today?"

"Oh, not too bad. A bit hotter than I expected, though."

"Yes, I had noticed that very fact myself." If anything, Argalaud's starched white shirt seemed even oranger than the day before, though he had ditched the coat and vest, so he only looked half ridiculous. "May I try some of your chili?"

"Sure. I usually let it simmer longer before putting it out, but you're welcome to take a taste."

Argalaud scooped up a plastic spoonful, maneuvered it almost daintily between his massive tusks, masticated it thoughtfully for several seconds, then said, quite evenly, "I find your chili extremely painful."

"Well, it is a bit on the hot end. I use fresh cut habaneros in it. Has quite a kick."

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"I believe the appropriate idiom is 'kicks like a mule.'"

Bob smiled. "That's about right."

"Well, thank you for letting me taste it. Despite the pain, I find it strangely compelling."

"Yep, that's chili for ya! By the way, if you don't mind me asking, what the hell was that yellow critter Granapagla or whatever was carrying around?"

The morlock frowned. "Bob, whatever you do I implore you not to eat of Granapalagala's chili. He is not to be trusted, and the proper authorities have been alerted to his presence. The 'yellow critter' you refer to is not intended for human consumption and may be very harmful to your health."

Bob glanced over at Griff, who was hunched over with his forehead resting on his table's edge, moaning lowly and massaging his temples. "I had sorta gathered that. Could somebody die from it?"

"While death is very unlikely, it could still do them great harm."

"I'll keep that in mind."

As Argalaud walked off, Bob wondered how the rest of Granap's chili addicts were faring. Besides, he needed to go back to the RV for a piss and another six-pack, so he put a "Back in 5" sign on the table and went wandering.

Red was at his table, a pot of chili steaming in front of him, but despite his ten gallon hat he seemed to be sweating even more than the hot afternoon warranted.

"Howdy, Red!" said Bob, grabbing a taster's spoon. "How's it going?"

"Been better," said Red, staring off into the distance.

"How's your friend Granap's chili?" asked Bob, chewing thoughtfully. Red's chili was perfectly serviceable, but it didn't seem to have the same balance between hot and sharp flavors it had evidenced in the past.

"I don't think I'm gonna be eating much chili today," said Red, who then turned around and threw up noisily into a plastic garbage bag.

"Well, gotta run," said Bob.

Little Vicki was in the middle of her belly dance routine, so all she could do was wink at him. He winked back.

Here or there were cookoff participants who looked quite unwell, but Bob couldn't have sworn that morlock chili was to blame more than tequila. He made his pit-stop, then grabbed another six pack and a jug of water. The key to keeping a good cookoff weekend buzz was balance, and Bob liked to think himself a master at walking that fine line.

When he got back to his table, he saw that there was a line that stretched all the way around the corner. "Somebody giving out free beer?" he asked the nearest participant.

"This is the line for Granpag's chili."

"Shit," said Bob. It was not shaping up to be a good day. He looked around and saw that most of his fellow contestants looked as depressed as he felt. Griff was nowhere in sight. Bob popped open a Shiner, put on Hank Williams III's *Toeripper* and resigned himself to a long, hot, pointless day.

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At about three PM a tired, sweaty Little Vicki came by to say hi.

"Long day?" he asked.

"Hon, I swear it's like I sweated off all them extra pounds today. Back when I was go-go dancin' I knew when I was tired, but belly dancin' seems to creep up on ya all at once."

"Probably 'cause it's hotter'n hell."

"You got that right. I'd be mighty 'preciative if you'd pop one of those Shiner Bocks for me. I'm 'bout to melt."

Bob handed her a longneck. "You want some chili with that?"

She shook her head, then held up the Shiner bottle and ran it back and forth across her brow. "Uh-uh. I ain't gonna do *that* again. I ever need to kill any intestinal parasites I'll come lookin' for you straight away. I know the real chileheads love them habaneros, but they're just too dang hot for me. Them things are a violation of the Geneva Convention."

"I am deeply, *deeply* wounded at your impugning both my culinary prowess and the reputation of the noble habanero, the undisputed king of the capsicum family."

"Well, it's damn sure king of my ass the next day."

"You get used to it after you been eating them awhile."

"I'd just as soon not."

Just then there was a buzz near the back of the line. Argalaud came striding into view followed by four other morlocks, each wearing the sashed robes they had worn in the TV broadcast of their landing, the ones that appeared either a dark blue or a reflective silver depending on how the light caught them. Each had gold tips on their tusks and carried a thin black rod. They strode past Bob's table and around the corner.

"Well, what the hell do you think all that's about?" Vicki asked.

"Either it's the world's smallest parade, or Granap is in deep shit."

There was an awful commotion around the corner, with morlocks grunting and hissing at each other and more than a few humans screaming, followed by the sounds of cookware being hurled violently to the ground. A few seconds later Granapalagala came barreling around the corner, the four robed morlocks in hot pursuit.

As Granapalagala sped past his table, Bob, almost without thinking, stuck out his size eleven Nocona boot, sending the morlock sprawling face first into the dirt. Granapalagala got up, enraged and sputtering, as the four robed morlocks, evidently policemen, surrounded him, black rods leveled.

"He has touched Royal Body!" he screamed, pointing at Bob. "I claim right of Glakanak!" The morlock policemen looked at each other and started hissing back and forth.

"Royal?" asked Bob skeptically.

"Granapalagala is a notorious confidence artist from our homeworld," Argalaud said. "He stowed away on a landing ship three months ago, then stole a ground vehicle from our embassy. However, being a third cousin, twice removed, of the Exalted Elector, he is, technically, royalty. This is why he was sent into exile rather than imprisoned, and why his crimes have not been reported to your police. He is a great embarrassment to the royal family."

"What the hell is Glakalaka?"

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"Glakanak is the challenge of personal combat to the death."

"*What?*"

"It is a privilege of the royal family, and rarely invoked."

"But he's a criminal!"

The robed morlocks seemed to come to a decision, and one of them came forward and bowed low before Bob. "Honorable human, we give most grateful thanks to your assistance in apprehending this dangerous criminal. However, the royal right of Glakanak takes precedence over mere criminal law. Therefore, the challenge must proceed."

"Wait a minute! I never agreed to this!"

"You may, of course, refuse the challenge by surrendering one of your tusks, or, in your case, teeth."

"Come, pink one!" said Granapalagala, ripping open his shirt to reveal a thick white pelt. "Surrender or die!"

Bob eyed him narrowly. "Listen, you jackass, I don't give a rat's ass about your Glakanak, but if you're looking to get a can of whupass opened up on 'ya, I'll be happy to oblige," said Bob, pulling out and cocking his .45.

"Wait, wait!" said Granapalagala, waving his hands. "No weapons in Glakanak! Illegal!"

"Well *this* weapon ain't illegal. I got a license for it," Bob said, fishing his concealed carry permit out of his wallet and passing it over to the morlock policemen. There was another long bout of hissing until the same one turned around.

"Since honorable human Bob Elliot was challenged upon his home soil, the rules governing the challenge must be those of his own people. As his weapon is legal in their eyes, it may be used for Glakanak."

"No fair, no fair!" cried Granapalagala, all the fight seeming to drain out of him. "What horrible place weapons for Glakanak uses?!?"

"Welcome to Texas," said Bob, taking aim.

"Mercy!" cried Granapalagala, flinging himself to the ground and slamming his head repeatedly into the dirt.

For the life of him, Bob didn't know what to make of it. He'd be more than happy to kill the son of a bitch, but not while he was busy abasing himself. He looked over at the other morlocks. "What the hell am I supposed to do? Is this Glakanak thing over?"

"Not until the token of surrender is given."

Granapalagala momentarily stopped his abasing and cast a sharp glance at the head morlock. "I Royal Body! This is outrage!"

"If you shoot him," said Argalaud, "please remember that our skulls are made out of extremely dense ferropolymers. Also remember that our hearts are lower in the body, close to where the stomach is in a human."

"Thanks for the tip!" said Bob, lowering his aim.

Granapalagala covered his face and screamed in anguish, orange tears streaking down his cheek. Then he reached up and grasped his left tusk and, with an equally painful cry and a wide spray of disturbingly bright red blood, wrenched it free in a single, massive jerk. He looked at the tusk a long moment, running his fingers along the length, then bowed and set it down on Bob's table without looking at him. Still crying, Granapalagala turned and let two of the morlock policemen lead him away.

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The rest of the afternoon was a blur of police reports and news interviews. Bob's chili came in fourth overall, which he thought was pretty good, given the distractions. Vicki was making him a necklace with Granapalagala's tusk. On TV the Secretary General of the UN was demanding that he be arrested for endangering relations with the aliens, despite the objections of the morlock authorities themselves. The Daughters of the Texas Revolution wanted to pin a medal on him.

Just as he was packing up after his mob of well-wishers (half of whom he'd never met before in his life) had finally drifted away, the head morlock made his way to the door of Bob's RV.

"We have been in touch with the Mission Commander," he said, "and he is very grateful for your helping us apprehend Granapalagala without violating the rules of Glakanak."

"Glad to be of service. Can you get that door there? This PortaStove's a little heavy."

"In fact, the commander has authorized us to bestow a reward upon you for your service."

"You don't need to do that."

"But we do! If Granapalagala had not been stopped, many of your people might have become sick or even died. Such an outcome would have been a blow to relations between our peoples. Therefore, the commander has authorized me to give you this as a token of our esteem and honor," he said, handing Bob a gold foil box with holes in the side, then bowing low before him.

"Well, that's mighty nice of you," said Bob, opening the box, "but you didn't have to do—"

He stopped short, looking at his gift. It was a giant yellow bug.

"—that. Really, you didn't. I mean, I don't really need a giant yellow bug!"

"But this is no common bug! This is the anagalanada, the sacred emblem of the royal family's strength and courage!"

"Yeah, but—"

"Granapalagala brought great shame to the royal family by stealing them from the ship's temple, and we must make amends!"

"Yeah, but—"

"But your actions have erased this shame! Your courage in facing Glakanak has made you a hero among our people! Please, take the anagalanada as a token of *all* our gratitude."

Bob gingerly lifted it out of the box by its carapace, watching its three pairs of antenna swing about in the breeze as a dozen spindly legs skittered for purchase. "Gee, I don't know what to say. What the hell do I feed it?"

"Fishmeal seems to work best of all earthly foods, but any diet rich in protein should suffice." The morlock bowed again. "In the name of the Exalted Elector and his servants here on Earth, we wish you a long and honorable life, Bob Elliot." The morlock bowed a final time, then turned and walked away.

Bob watched him go, then looked at his new pet bug. "I guess I'll call you Fido," he said. O

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THE BIRD OF PARADISE

Daniel Abraham and Susan Fry

Daniel Abraham and Susan Fry attended Clarion West together in 1998. Mr. Abraham's work has appeared in *Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy,* and several anthologies. His first novel, *Unreal City,* will be released in early 2004. Ms. Fry was a quarterly first-prize recipient in the 2001 Writers of the Future Contest. Her fiction has also been published in other anthologies, including *The Museum of Horrors,* which received the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology in 2002. This is her first story for *Asimov's* and both authors' first collaboration.

"So why should we help you?" Arturo said. "Your yanqui plague doesn't kill *us*."

"*Our* plague?" Inside her containment helmet, Dr. McCloud blinked, her smile softening as if she were confused. Arturo was tempted to switch into English, even though the doctor's Spanish was as good as his. But she didn't speak Mayan, so why give her an advantage?

"You norteamericanos funded the dam. The dam broke. The plague came." Arturo pointed at her screen.

Chiapas, in southern Mexico. A red line marked the Guatemalan border, a green line the normal path of the Rio Quetzal as it meandered down from the Yepocapa hydroelectric dam, a sickly yellow swath where the river had flooded the rainforest.

"Actually, Mr. Celorio," the doctor said, speaking slowly, as if he couldn't understand her, "we believe the disease is indigenous, from some rare animal species displaced by the flooding. We think that's why the Tojolabal, Xinca, and Chamula only get sick for a few days, whereas Anglos and mestizos die. You've built up resistance."

She pointed at the screen, her finger clumsy in the bright orange plastic of her containment suit. Arturo looked down at his own hands. He was

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embarrassed to see the dirt under his fingernails and the pale, criss-cross scars from hacking paths through the rainforest with a machete. They weren't university hands anymore. He tried to feel proud of them anyway. His shame made him angry.

"The first outbreak was here, in San Cristobal," the doctor said, "from Mayan traders selling local weavings to tourists."

"Pedro Alcamar and his sons," Arturo said. "Yes, I know them. They bought blankets, *huipiles,* and *rebozos* from us. Are they all right?"

"*They're* fine." The doctor's voice was clipped. "The rest of San Cristobal is not." She zoomed in the map and put her finger over the dot marked Xinca, the dot that represented his village, his people, and the old missionary schoolhouse he and the doctor were sitting in now. Slowly, she traced up to Tlcaclel Santa Cruz, just to the north. Despite himself, Arturo was impressed when the picture moved to follow her finger. He hadn't seen such technology in many years.

"This is where they first reported symptoms, in Santa Cruz."

"So you think they contracted the disease in the rainforest between the two villages."

She looked surprised that Arturo had figured that out. "Yes. Our beta team will go to Santa Cruz and search the rainforest between here and there. That's why we need your help, your traditional knowledge of the rainforest." She smiled brightly, as if he were a child.

Arturo clenched his fist and watched his scar ripple. "Traditional isn't the same as ignorant. I have a degree in agricultural engineering from the University of Mexico. I came back to live with my people because I *chose* to." His voice rose.

Dr. McCloud raised her hands, the containment suit palms out and placating. "I think we got off on the wrong foot, Mr. Celorio. Can we try this again?"

The old wooden door behind Arturo scraped open. Arturo turned to see his son framed in the doorway. Victor's eyes were wide as he looked at the doctor in her orange suit, but Arturo could tell he was fascinated, not frightened.

"Papa?" Victor said, still looking at the doctor. "Another truck came, with people like her."

He spoke in Mayan, and Arturo replied in the same language.

"Go wait with old Iztel. She'll let you play with her chickens and doves. I'll be out soon."

Victor nodded, but it was a moment before he could tear himself away. His interest made Arturo nervous.

"Your son?" the doctor said.

"Yes."

"He looks like you." The doctor hesitated. "I have a daughter. She's eleven."

"Where is she?"

"Mexico City." The doctor took a deep breath. "Mr. Celorio . . ."

"You need our help, I know." Arturo frowned. "When the Spaniards first came, they brought diseases. Smallpox and influenza, diseases that had been in Europe for centuries. The Spaniards were resistant. We weren't. So we died and they didn't."

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"What does that mean?" Dr. McCloud demanded. "That we're getting what we deserve?"

Arturo shrugged. He could tell that the doctor was furious now. Her pale blue eyes were wide behind her face shield. But behind her anger, Arturo thought that he could see fear.

"For the first twenty-four hours," she said, "the virus presents like a cold with a mild fever. At that point, your people get better."

"And yours?"

She pressed the screen twice, too quickly for him to follow, then turned the screen toward him. The image was a complex curve of black and red and pale flesh. It took him a moment to understand what he was seeing.

"It's already killed nearly a hundred thousand. If it reaches Mexico City . . ."

Arturo closed his eyes. He remembered his teachers at the university, many of them mestizo or even Anglo. He thought of Dr. McCloud's daughter, a young girl who probably had her mother's red hair and white skin.

"Very well. We will help you." He opened his eyes. "My son says the truck with your beta team has arrived."

Arturo went himself to the councils and to the houses. The village was five hundred strong, all of them with a healthy distrust of outsiders. He asked whether anyone had seen new animals. Everyone said no. Then he told them to be careful; to only speak in Mayan; not to let the Ts'ul, the outsiders, know that they understood Spanish; and to keep their ears open.

When he returned to Dr. McCloud, she was unpacking supplies and equipment from the new truck.

"They have seen nothing," he said, in Spanish.

She sighed. "Then let's organize the search parties."

Arturo picked the best trackers and hunters in the village. Most were men, and in their embroidered shirts and brown pants they looked vulnerable standing next to Dr. McCloud's team. It wasn't just that his men were shorter than the Anglos—they looked vulnerable because they weren't wearing the orange suits, even though Arturo knew that they were protected from the disease and the Anglos weren't.

Unless, of course, the virus mutated. Or the doctor was lying.

Then Arturo heard his son's delighted shrieks.

"Papa, papa, *la maquina!*"

There was no word for "machine" in Mayan, so Victor used the Spanish. It was a generic word, and Arturo at first thought that Victor was talking about a new computer. But then he heard a familiar, fast chopping noise from the sky. A helicopter.

It landed next to the old stone *cenote* in the center of the village, kicking swirls of dust into the well and probably dirtying the water. Arturo was annoyed, but Victor was delighted. He would have run right up to the helicopter if Arturo hadn't caught hold of him.

"Wait until the blades stop moving," he told his son, in Mayan. "They are dangerous." He lifted Victor up onto his hip, realizing that Victor would soon be too big to be carried.

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"But it's like a metal bird," Victor said excitedly. "A bird with metal scales, like Quetzalcoatl!"

Arturo bit back a sudden fear. "It looks more like an insect than a plumed serpent," he said, more sharply than he'd intended.

"But papa . . ."

"Be careful, Victor," he said, keeping his voice calmer. "The last time we thought that Quetzalcoatl had come to save our people, it turned out to be Cortez, a Spaniard who enslaved us. Gods are nothing like a helicopter." Arturo deliberately used the English word.

Victor nodded again, but the only part he seemed to be interested in was the name of *la maquina*. "Heli-cop-ter," he said, squirming to get down.

As Arturo lowered him to the ground, Dr. McCloud waved. She was smiling. "The beta team's set to go to Santa Cruz," she called. "Let's get the first search party out."

They killed and killed and killed. For six days, three groups a day, the *yanquis* in their suits led Arturo's band of Xinca into the forest and came back with birds and lizards and insects and mammals—all dead. They carried them to the sealed tent and left them there for the scientists to test, spiriting the corpses away with rituals as complex as any religious rite.

Night had almost fallen—the west was still bright, the east an indigo so deep it was hardly different from black—when Arturo brought in the last of the day's catch. The scientists gathered around the dead like carrion eaters. Arturo had found a paca, a howler monkey, and four motmot birds, their feathers splashed red with blood.

"Any of them unfamiliar?" Dr. McCloud asked. It was probably a sign of Dr. McCloud's exhaustion that she spoke to him as an equal, using big words. She looked so tired behind her bubble that Arturo wondered whether she'd slept at all over the past days, especially since they'd gotten the news of an outbreak in Mexico City. He'd grown so used to thinking of her as alien that he was surprised to find himself feeling sorry for her.

"No, though some I haven't seen in a long time, since I was a boy."

She tapped something on her screen. The light from the computer lit her face from below, throwing her high cheekbones into relief. Most of his people would find her ugly, with her pale skin, reddish hair, blue eyes, and pinched face. His own wife had been perfect—short with shiny black hair, a wide nose, and a broad, strong body. But Arturo had spent four years in Mexico City, where he had seen American television and movies. He knew the doctor was beautiful by *yanqui* standards. It was a disturbing double vision to see her through traditional eyes and *yanqui* eyes at the same time. Ugly-beautiful. Beautiful-ugly. Arturo pressed the palm of his hand to his forehead. He was tired, too.

"Which ones?" She sighed and rubbed the clear plastic over her face as if she were used to scratching her nose when she was tired.

"The . . ." Arturo fought for Spanish words. "The howler monkeys and the pacas. There haven't been monkeys since before I left for university."

Dr. McCloud nodded and made more notes.

If Arturo hadn't been so tired, he would have stayed quiet, but instead

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his mouth kept going where his exhausted brain led him. "It's like time moving backward," he said. He took a deep breath, relishing the heavy green scent of the afternoon rains in the air. He wondered if the doctor could smell it through her helmet. Probably not. After all, that was the point of the suit, wasn't it? To cut her off from his world. "All these animals coming back, the dam going away. I keep expecting the villages to be back, too. All the people."

She paused in her typing and looked up at him. Beauty and ugliness. Behind her the stars were coming out.

"I don't understand. The flooding is all in uninhabited areas, isn't it?"

"The dam killed us before it broke," Arturo said, "killed us building it. The government decided to 'employ' fifty Mayan villages. So they burned the houses and herded everyone off to carry and pour cement."

Dr. McCloud dropped her hands into her lap. One of the scientists called to her to look at something, but she ignored him.

"My village was just one," Arturo said. "I worked that dam. Three hundred people in my village died. I survived. I made friends, went to Mexico City. When I got back, my village was gone. So I helped to rebuild it."

"I didn't. . . ."

"We've been self-sufficient for five years because we use *milpa* farming—the way my great-great-grandfathers rotated the crops. Nothing we've gotten from *yanquis* has ever done any good. A dam for electricity? We don't need electricity—or guns. Guns killed my wife, Victor's mother. There was a gang fight in Mexico City. She wasn't even part of it."

"I'm sorry," Dr. McCloud said. She bit her lip, then punched her screen with her finger. "Here," she said, and tilted it toward him. It glowed in the twilight like some kind of holy object, but when he looked down he found himself looking at the picture of a young, smiling girl. She stood on a white mountain slope, wearing long poles on her feet that Arturo recognized from his studies as "skis." Arturo was surprised to see that the girl looked nothing like Dr. McCloud. Her hair was dark and straight, her face rounder, and her eyes. . . .

"Her father is Chinese," Dr. McCloud said, as if she sensed his question. "We're divorced."

Arturo was uncomfortable with her frankness. She looked like a woman, but she spoke like a man. His wife had been traditional, and he'd been away from the university so long that he'd forgotten about women like Dr. McCloud. She confused him in a way that was almost sexual. He wondered for the first time what her body looked like under the decontamination suit. Beauty and ugliness. He was relieved when she looked down at the picture of her daughter and he didn't have to stare into her eyes anymore.

"We aren't demons, you know," she said. "We're just normal people with our backs against the wall. I wish this wasn't all coming down this way, Arturo. I wish that. . . ."

The doctor's screen beeped, and her daughter's picture vanished. A voice in English said, "Alpha team, alpha team, come in. This is Dr. David Kuhn. Can you hear me?" The voice faded in and out, as if slices had been cut from the middle of the words, but Arturo could hear panic even through the static.

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Dr. McCloud punched a button on her screen. "This is alpha team, David," she said, also in English. "We read you."

"Carrie?" The voice suddenly sounded very young. "I'm . . ." It faded away. "I'm sick."

"Oh, Jesus," Dr. McCloud said. "Is it the San Cristobal virus?"

"I'm not sure," the voice said. The pause crackled. ". . . presenting with a fever. I think I've been exposed . . . an animal."

Silence.

"David?" The doctor's voice was calm, but Arturo saw her fists clench.

Arturo heard a smattering of garbled Spanish, as if the man was talking to someone else. Then English again.

"I'm about an hour away."

"We're ready for you," Dr. McCloud said. She pressed a button, ending the transmission, and stood up. She'd obviously forgotten all about Arturo, because she looked surprised when his hand shot out to stop her.

"You can't bring him here," Arturo said. "You aren't sure what he's got."

He spoke in English. He was surprised how easily the English came out. He realized he had actually been thinking partially in English ever since the doctor had arrived, perhaps because he'd been thinking in words that did not exist in Spanish or in Mayan. Helicopter. Bioweapon. Laboratory. *Yanqui* inventions, *yanqui* words.

The doctor's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "You didn't tell me you spoke English!"

"You didn't ask."

"Then you know I have to get the treatment area ready for him."

"And you don't know what the disease *is*. There are plenty of other diseases in the rainforest that we die from just as easily as you do. We've helped you. Don't endanger us. My people don't have decontamination suits."

For a minute, Dr. McCloud looked as if she would listen to him. But then her lips pressed together, and she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Celorio," she said. "I'm personally a strong advocate of indigenous rights. But I've got outbreaks in sixteen states now. There may be as many as thirty million people exposed. So I'm willing to make some sacrifices here." She looked away from Arturo and toward the rainforest. "Remember how you said the Spaniards brought diseases? Well, they also brought guns." Now she looked back at him. Her eyes were ugly. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Arturo said.

An hour later, three men staggered out from the green wall of vegetation that surrounded the village. Two of them were dark skinned. The patterns of their woven *huipiles* came from Tlcaclel Santa Cruz. They carried the third man—a *yanqui* in an orange containment suit.

Dr. McCloud and two of the other scientists ran over with a stretcher.

"David," she said, looking down at the injured *yanqui*. "What happened?" She spoke in English.

The man opened his mouth, but the words that came out made no sense.

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"He's feverish," Dr. McCloud said grimly. "But we can't take him into the lab. It's not big enough, and he'll contaminate the sterile environment. We'll have to set up a facility out here."

"You can take my hut," Arturo said, also in English. "It's the closest one to your laboratory. Just let me send Victor to Iztel."

She looked at him in surprise, but obeyed. Then she went back out to the lab and returned with medical equipment—an IV stand, syringes, plastic bags, and bottles.

"We may as well take off his suit," she said.

Arturo saw that the orange plastic had been lacerated with five long tears, as if the man had been scratched by the claws of a large animal. Beneath the gaping material a dark liquid glistened. Blood.

The Mayan trackers hung back nervously. Their clothes were caked with mud and also with blood from the sick man. But they did not have any scratches. They looked healthy.

"Did you touch him?" Arturo asked them, in Mayan. Xinca Mayan was so close to Tlcaclel Mayan that they understood him perfectly.

"We carried him halfway here," the older of the pair said, also in Mayan. "Of course we touched him."

"What happened?" Dr. McCloud demanded in Spanish.

The trackers looked at each other, then at the ground, then at Arturo. The younger one cleared his throat, but the older man spoke. His Spanish was slow and tortured, and he got the verbs all wrong.

"Dr. Kuhn, he spot something in a tree. We go ahead to open a path with our machetes. Then we hear screaming. We run back, and he lie on the ground. He say he try to catch an animal, but it attack him. He get sick the next day."

"And you aren't sick?" Arturo demanded, "even though you touched him?"

"Yesterday, a little sick. But it was gone quickly."

"What kind of animal?" Dr. McCloud said. "You didn't bring it with you?"

The older tracker looked to Arturo. "We did not see it," he said.

"But didn't he tell you about it? Didn't he tell you what it was?" Dr. McCloud sounded frustrated, angry, close to tears.

The older tracker answered Arturo, as if he had asked the question. "He say it is a bird—a bird with feathers the color of silver, like metal. It has a long tongue, and a tail like a serpent."

Arturo felt his chest go tight even before he knew why. He clenched his hands into fists, afraid that they would shake.

"A bird that looked like a snake?" Dr. McCloud said. "What kind of bird is that? Have you ever seen something like that before? Where was it?"

"Say nothing," Arturo said to the trackers, in Mayan.

They nodded.

"What did you say?" Dr. McCloud asked.

"I asked if that was all they knew," he said.

She stared at him, as if seeing him for the first time. "You're lying to me."

"Why would I lie?"

The wounded *yanqui* died in the night. Arturo saw Dr. McCloud weeping over the body, tears streaking the inside of her faceplate where she

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couldn't wipe them away.

Arturo sat outside his dark hut, staring out at the black, angry shadows of the rainforest. It was never silent, the rainforest. He could hear water drip from the trees onto the leaf-carpeted soil. Hidden animals moved through the dense canopy far above ground, like the voices of the dead. He remembered his grandparents going into the rainforest, to the old *cenote* from before the time of the Spaniards. There, they would pick offerings of *xyoli* flowers for one particular animal, a god. Sometimes they had taken other offerings of butterflies or small birds. They didn't like it when Arturo followed them. They said it was not wise to bring children, because in the old days the gods had demanded human sacrifice. These were memories Arturo had buried inside of him when he went away to Mexico City. They had come back now. Like the pacas and the howler monkeys, the memories returned.

The next day, the first of the villagers began to get sick.

"But I should have gotten sick first," Arturo protested to Dr. McCloud as she went from villager to villager with medical supplies. "I'm the one who's been sleeping in the hut where the *yanqui* died."

"You don't like the way it spreads, you'll have to take that up with the virus," she snapped.

Dr. McCloud made the sick villagers lie down. She gave them fluids. She touched them, as if she thought that touch, even through her plastic suit, could help. Despite himself, Arturo was impressed. He thought again about her daughter, and he knew that he should tell Dr. McCloud where to find the sacred grove of his grandparents' god, where the bird, if it was a bird, lived. Then she could go and find it and make a vaccine and save the world from the disease. But on the other hand . . .

On the other hand, perhaps it was time for the world to change.

His head hurt with that thought, and he put his face in his hands. Then he looked up at Dr. McCloud.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"You don't think I know what's happening," Arturo said, "but I do. You think that you can make us into you by having us sacrifice the animals that are coming back. You think you can make it into a science. But the cycles are changing. The cycle for my people may just have begun again. It will be again as it once was."

She looked confused. "I don't understand. You're mixing up English,

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Spanish, and Mayan. You know I don't speak Mayan."

"Time is moving backward," Arturo said in careful Spanish, enunciating as if he was talking to a child. "There is no virus. This is the *yanqui* being burned out of us."

Ugly and beautiful, Dr. McCloud fumbled with one of her pockets and pressed a strip of paper to Arturo's forehead. He tried to push her away, but she was stronger than he'd expected, or else he was weak.

"Well, congratulations," she said, "you've got it after all. Come on, let's get you to bed."

She steered him into his hut, holding his elbow. He heard her speaking to Victor, explaining something and sending him away to Iztel's hut as Arturo climbed into his hammock.

The doctor put a clay pitcher of cool water next to him. She said something he didn't understand, then touched his cheek with her hand. For a second, he thought that he felt her warm skin instead of the plastic of her suit. Then she left.

Arturo lay in his slightly swaying hammock, staring at the thatched ceiling of his hut. The criss-cross pattern of the leaves reminded him of a weaving, like the infected blankets the Spaniards had used to kill his people, or like the *huipiles* the traders who had passed the new disease to Mexico City had purchased from the Xinca.

Night fell, and Arturo felt his fever rise. He drank most of the water in the pitcher, then slept. When he woke just before dawn, he still did not know what to do. He carefully swung himself out of his hammock. The floor dipped under his feet, and he knew he wasn't completely recovered from the illness. He fumbled in his hut for a book of matches and his machete. He took them and walked to a hut at the edge of the village—Iztel's hut—where he knew the doctor had taken Victor.

He couldn't hear a sound from the hut. Iztel and Victor were probably asleep. Instead, he went to the poultry run beside Iztel's hut. He reached into one of the wicker cages and grabbed a dove, the kind that the women made into a good stew. The bird was used to being handled, and it sat quietly as he put it into a small cloth sack. Then he took a deep breath and walked into the rainforest.

Familiar landmarks loomed up out of the dim light—a ceiba that had been struck by lightning, an unexpected clearing, an epiphyte plant hanging from a cecropia tree like a bird's nest. Everything he looked at had three names—one English, one Spanish, one Mayan. He passed a tree and thought not just *tree* but *arbol* and *ceiba*. His machete knocking clumps of vines out of his way had three names. The world was divided into three. He felt dizzy. This was even worse than the double vision he'd experienced when he looked at Dr. McCloud. He knew he was feverish.

Arturo walked for a long time until he came to the *xyoli* grove. All the adults in the village knew where it was, because you had to keep children away from the *xyoli* flowers. They were narcotic, like poppies. There were tales of children who ate the flowers and never returned to the village, wandering lost through the rainforest for the rest of their lives.

These were the flowers Arturo's grandparents had taken to their bird.

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The flowers were so rare that they did not have an English name, or even a Spanish one. They were so rare that a real animal would probably have to come to this very grove in order to eat them.

If it were more than an animal, it would come here just the same. In the middle of the grove stood a well—Spanish *pozo,* Mayan *cenote*. It was so old it no longer held water, and the walls had crumbled into heaps of clay-colored stones, but the rainforest had not grown over it—proof that people still worshipped here. The *xyoli* flowers were in full bloom. In the morning light, the red flowers glowed against the green leaves of their trees. Each flower was bigger than a man's hand. Arturo reached up and picked an armful. They smelled rich and sweet, like vanilla.

He knelt in front of the *cenote* and placed the flowers in a circle in the soft earth. Then he took the dove from the sack, feeling the warm beat of its heart as it cooed in alarm. He raised his machete and killed it.

Three words for "kill" echoed in his mind.

The blood splashed over the flowers, and he placed the body of the dove in the center of the circle. He took out his matches and lit one. The flame was the same color as the flowers. He dropped the match onto the flowers and they began to burn. The vanilla scent grew stronger, with a hint of bitterness now at the base.

"You're using some kind of drug to alter your brain chemistry," his English mind said.

"You're acting like one of the old, ignorant ones," said his Spanish mind.

"Inhale deeply," he thought in Mayan, and he did. Slowly the smells—blood, feathers, flowers—drove everything else from his thoughts. He stopped thinking in words at all. The disturbing triple vision vanished. He saw the trees and flowers as nameless. He was aware of every grain of dirt under his knees, under his hands, as he knelt before the *cenote*. He was aware of the sunlight on his back growing warm, the sweat trickling down his armpits, the trills of the animals in the rainforest sounding like a language he could almost understand.

He was at peace.

The sun grew brighter. He squinted against its brilliance and saw the wings of a great bird against the sky. The silver feathers glistened, as metallic as a serpent's scales. The wings opened and closed around him with a sound like scissors. The sun became the eye of the serpent. A long, forked tongue touched his foot.

Arturo opened his eyes. It was midday, and he was lying in front of the *cenote* on the ground. The flowers in front of him had burned to ash. There was only one word for everything in his head, and it was in Mayan.

Arturo picked up his machete and walked back through the rainforest toward the village.

Dr. McCloud was waiting for him. "Where the hell have you been?" she demanded.

"Out," he said, hating the way the Spanish felt in his mouth, "looking."

Anger bloomed on her face, then vanished. She shook her head. "Arturo, we have a problem."

The villagers who had been sick when Arturo left were now up and

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walking around. They were carrying out their normal activities as if nothing had happened, fetching water, feeding the chickens, yelling at their children. They looked as they had looked a thousand years before. Arturo smiled.

But Dr. McCloud led Arturo to Iztel's hut, where Victor lay on a cot in the center. His face was gray under the bronze color of his skin. Sweat plastered his hair to his forehead, and the pale snake of a saline drip draped from the IV stand into his arm. Arturo passed his fingertips across his son's face. Victor tried to smile. Arturo tried to smile back, though his heart felt bruised.

Dr. McCloud's face was even paler than usual. "The other children were up hours ago," she said. "I don't understand it. I think he's entered the second stage of the disease."

"I see," Arturo said.

"I don't," she said. Her voice was sharp. "It's impossible. Unless . . ." She glanced down at Victor, then at Arturo. "Is there any possibility Victor is mestizo?"

Arturo looked at his son. He could see his wife's face there, and his own. His wife had always claimed to be full Mayan. She'd certainly looked it. But perhaps she hadn't been. Or perhaps she'd been raped one night in the barrio and had been too afraid to tell him about it. Or perhaps his own great-great-grandmother had gone willingly with some Spanish soldier.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"Of course it matters." Dr. McCloud's voice rose, and Victor stirred feebly on the cot. She spoke more quietly. "If the virus is mutating, it could affect your people."

It won't, Arturo thought. But he didn't say that. He knew it was only the god taking his full sacrifice.

Dr. McCloud's eyes narrowed as if she was trying to read his mind. "Isn't there anything you can tell me?" she said. "Anything that might help me help your son?"

Arturo didn't answer, and Dr. McCloud leaned closer to him, smelling of plastic and death.

"You know where the animal is, don't you?"

"There is no animal," Arturo said. "I would like to be alone with my son now."

Dr. McCloud's face was pale and pinched as if she were already sick with the disease, her blue eyes large and glittering feverishly. "In that case," she said, "I am sorry about your son."

And I am sorry about your daughter, Arturo thought, but he didn't say this, either. He just watched her leave the hut, heard her calling out orders to her men. Still struggling, still trying.

"Papa," Victor said. "The doctor, she showed me how to work her computer. I talked to a man in Paris. Can we have a computer, Papa?"

"Hush now," Arturo said. "Be a good boy and rest."

Victor closed his eyes as if he had only been waiting for permission. Arturo watched his stillness for a moment, then gently placed the flowers around Victor's head. O

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The Power of Myth

We anticipated the centaur's
visitation with pleasure,
but soon discovered
centaurs piss everywhere,
trample everything,
and curse at everyone.
This behavior continued for weeks,
with citizens grumbling about
the boneheads who brought him
to our quiet town.
Eventually a drive-by shooting
left him bleeding in the street.
Many volunteers helped dig his grave.
His resting place remains unmarked.
Today people curse eloquently
if you ever mention his name.

—**Mario Milosevic**

Illustration by June Levine

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LISTEN TO ME

David Marusek

Deep-space travelers may commonly suffer horrendous cases of cabin fever. The author, who considers himself an expert on the terrestrial variety of this affliction, offers up this tightly wound tale of a passenger with too much time on his hands.

She slips out of your bunk before you can stop her. By the cabin's night glow, you see her open the wardrobe and clamber in. She sits atop the pile of dirty laundry.

No, baby, you say. Don't do that. Come back to bed. But nothing you say entices her to return, and in a little while you are lulled to sleep listening to the creaks and groans of the great metal ship all around you.

In the morning, she's up before you. She takes her allotted shower and puts on a jumpsuit.

Not that one, you say. It's soiled. Put on a clean one. She ignores your suggestion.

On the way to the commissary for breakfast, she runs ahead of you to gape at the Trip Log in the starboard AC37 Lounge. The Trip Log tags stars that are visible from the view ports. It clocks ship's speed and time, and announces births, marriages, divorces, deaths, and other stats of possible interest to passengers.

None of it means a thing to her, except the Star Course Display. She reaches into the holospace and tries to push the ship's icon further along its path between the stars. She does this every morning, as though she can hasten the trip, and it's too precious.

You pull her to the commissary, a wide, low-ceilinged space ringing with voices. She has no appetite, and on the way to the table, she trips over her own feet and drops her tray. Bangs her shins. Everyone watches her holding back tears.

She vomits on the floor of your cabin. You've about had it with her messes, and you tell her so as you gather rags and disinfectant.

She's in the wardrobe again, with the doors shut, but you can hear her rustling in there, and you know she can hear you too.

You ask her why she does it. Why puke on the floor when the head is

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right over there? She should throw up in the toilet, if she has to, or in the sink or shower stall. Not on the floor.

No comment from the wardrobe.

She makes another mess, this time in your bunk. This time, it's no accident. It's foul, and you rolled in it in your sleep. You are so disgusted with her you could cry. You get up to change the sheets and take a shower. She's hiding again, in the wardrobe. It rattles against the metal bulkhead with a hypnotic tattoo.

You search the Sickbay site for a talking brochure about the needle. You sit her next to you and play it for her. The simple illustrations and plain language tell the story: It's painless, just like falling asleep, a friendly healthaide can give it, friends gather to say farewell, bye-bye, the end.

You ask her if that's what she wants? Behaving like that.

You receive a summons to see a counselor in Sickbay. The summons instructs you to bring her in, too, for a health checkup. You could resist, but a summons is backed by the authority of the captain, so you comply. You warn her to be on her very best behavior.

The counselor's small office is made smaller with furniture, lungplants, and clutter. The floor is carpeted, and the metal walls are draped with textile hangings that soften the riveted surfaces. You are alone in the small room with the counselor who is attempting to soften you up with small talk. Finally, she gets to the point and asks if you know why she summoned you.

You shrug your shoulders and say you were hoping she'd eventually tell you.

She frowns like you've disappointed her. She says, I summoned you because of all the complaints from your neighbors.

Complaints?

She frowns again. Yes, complaints about your shouting and screaming at your squeezie. At all hours. Curses, threats. Needle this, needle that. Would you like to hear a recording?

You decline her offer.

She explains how thin the cabin walls are. She reaches behind her to run her hand across a wooly wall hanging. Sometimes a little extra padding helps. But the best solution is to treat the underlying cause, don't you agree? She asks you what's going on in your life lately.

You tell her that lately you've been stuck on a starship between Points A and B.

This almost brings a smile. She acknowledges that space travel can be *very* stressful. That's why there's a Hospitality Service on board. She pulls up a page and says that surely there must be *some* activity you'd find engaging. Casino games? Horticulture? Ballroom Dance? The object is to get out and socialize with *real* people on a regular basis.

She brings up a miniature version of the Star Course Display and points to the colorless gap at the top of the arc. This gap represents the end of the acceleration burn and the beginning of the braking phase, dur-

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ing which the ship will experience several months of free-fall and variable gravity. She explains that the level of passenger stress usually rises the closer the ship gets to this point. After that the stress dissipates, as if by magic. It's not magic, she says, but the fact that we'll have passed the halfway mark. The halfway mark is everything aboard a starship. And we'll reach it in only three more years.

A page of diagnostic reports pops up. She takes a moment to review it, then nods with satisfaction. In the meantime, did you know that your squeezie is deaf?

No, you did not.

A virus has been making the rounds on Deck 37. In rare cases, it causes Meniere's Disease: an inflammation of the inner ear, ringing, vertigo, permanent hearing loss. Has she been sick?

You make a mental note of this slide from counseling session to interrogation. You say she might have had the sniffles.

The sniffles, the counselor concludes, have left your squeezie with profound hearing loss. She's as deaf as a post.

They fit her with cochlear implants to restore her hearing. The change in her is immediate and startling. No more messes. No more skulking in the wardrobe. She's as attentive and compliant as when you first adopted her. She paints her toenails. She's your little darling in bed again.

Other passengers, especially the men, notice the change in her. They stare when she goes by. One fellow is bold enough to suggest an overnight swap, but you suggest he mind his own business.

For weeks you don't sleep. You join a robotics club that meets twice a week, but it hardly sustains your interest.

Every night, while you lie helplessly awake, she sleeps. You press your ear to the metal bed frame and listen to the sizzling sound of interstellar dust colliding with the bow of the ship. It doesn't help.

You stop leaving your bunk, even for meals.

She amuses herself with games and puzzles on the computer, and she chats with her friends on the intercom. She wants to go out, but you say no. She lets it drop but asks again in an hour.

Ship's Engineering sets an appointment for your annual cabin inspection. You defer it a half-dozen times until they issue a compliance order.

They come in, two young men. They measure particulate and radiation levels. They test electric, comm, and plumbing. They admire your wall hangings.

She flirts with them while they work. They flirt back. One of them checks the wall clamps that hold your bunk in place. He takes a startled look at you and asks if you're ill.

You tell him to finish his inspection and mind his own business.

On the sly, she exposes herself to them as they leave, and they wink at her.

Tonight is the tiredest night of all. She lies at your side, snuggled in a

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cocoon of sheets and blankets, exuding a warm gingery scent. Her breath is slow and deep and with the slightest rasp of a snore.

In this manner she has finally worn you down.

Gently, you part the hair above her ear, exposing a little pink disk. It's the external pickup—the microphone and amp—for the cochlear implant that's embedded in her skull. The disk is held in place by magnets under her skin. She wears her pickups even to bed.

Gently, you peel the little pink disk from its shaved patch of scalp. She stirs in her sleep, and you hold perfectly still while she settles. You explore the pink disk with your fingertips. It's soft and pliant, and there's a little lump that contains the electronics and controls. You bring it to your mouth and bite down until the little lump crunches. Then you carefully replace the disk on her skin.

One down, one to go. You wait for her to turn over so you can fix her other side, but it takes too long, and you fall asleep.

Halfway may or may not be everything aboard a starship, but for tonight, at least, it'll do. O

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THE PATH OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

Tom Purdom

The author tells us that the biggest event lately for him and his wife, "has been our move from a three-story row house to a high-rise apartment. This means that I don't have to shovel walks and that I've assembled five new bookcases, six new dining room chairs, two new armchairs, and a platform bed with a twelve-drawer under-the-bed dresser. The electric screwdriver is clearly technology's greatest gift to mankind." Mr. Purdom is also home-schooling his grandson in history and science, and developing his granddaughter's personality with gifts of Lara Croft: Tomb Raider games for her Gameboy.

Davin Sam owned a complete map of his wife's chromosomes and a detailed flow chart of her postnatal personality modification programs. Lizera had originally been designed for investors who were staffing a middle-level resort in the asteroid belt, back in the solar system. Her designers had assumed that she would spend most of her waking hours working, but they had also realized that she would have to relate to all kinds of people. She had been endowed with a strong appetite for learning, therefore, and a carefully measured artistic impulse. Today she had spent six hours sitting in a corner of Davin's observation tower, absorbed in her current reading program. The last time Davin had glanced at her reader, she had been consuming a dissertation on the history of gunpowder military organization.

When Lizera had needed a break from reading, she had sealed herself inside a listening helmet and immersed herself in music. Usually she listened to Bach and the Chinese composers of the late twenty-first century. She played two instruments: a high quality electronic simulator and a classic Chinese qin.

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There were days when Davin and Lizera prattled for hours while he kept one eye on the images on his screenbank. Sometimes Lizera played one of her instruments while he concentrated on his screens. Today, the only sounds Davin was interested in were the high-pitched chatterings relayed through the loudspeakers. The lakenesters seemed to be engaging in a midwinter overhaul of their nest. Every animal in the nest seemed to be doing something.

The nest rose from the water two hundred meters from the lakeshore. Twelve of the fifty-seven animals in the nest had probes attached to their nervous systems. A hundred and twelve other probes had been attached to the structure of the nest. Davin could observe every tunnel and room. He could watch the transmissions from twenty probes at a time on his screenbank.

"I'm going back to the compound," Lizera said.

She didn't ask him if he minded if she left him alone. She knew his moods.

"I may spend the night here," Davin said.

"I'd be surprised if you didn't."

Davin didn't turn around until she was ready to leave. Then he gave her a quick up-and-down inspection. She had covered her gown with a red armored coat. A long gun rested in a holster built into the coat. A pair of sighting glasses covered her eyes. Their residential compound was only two kilometers from the tower, on top of a low hill, but they always went armed and armored when they traveled between the two sites.

Outside the tower, on the landward side, the winter wind bent the yellow grasses. Most of the scattered trees were bare. The rest still carried their yellow leaves.

The planet had been discovered by a Japanese probe and the Japanese had given it an apt name—Itoko, *cousin*. At first glance, the flora and fauna looked like simple variations on their Earth equivalents. There were ground creatures that resembled mammals. There were flying organisms that could be compared to birds and insects. The life forms were all constructed from complicated carbon-based molecules. But nothing was quite the same.

The molecules that resembled amino acids had different chemical formulas. The molecule that performed the same function as chlorophyll produced plants that looked yellow, not green. The molecule that carried the genetic code was a self-replicating double helix, just like DNA, but it was constructed from a different set of bases, phosphates, and sugars, and it responded to a different array of chemical signals when it performed its genetic functions.

Davin turned back to his screenbank and switched one of the screens to the camera that would track Lizera's progress. Two guardcats greeted her at the bottom of the stairs. One cat took up a position a few steps in front of her. The other cat fell in behind her.

Sometimes Davin watched her as she walked along the path they had worn between the tower and the compound. She was a fleshy, sinuously graceful woman. He could respond to the way she moved even when she was hidden inside the tent-like armored coat. The slightest movement of

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her clothes evoked an image of the body moving inside them. Today, he kept his attention on the screenbank.

The lakenesters could be compared to beefy river otters or oversized water rats, but no terrestrial aquatic mammal had ever developed the social organization that dominated their lifestyle. Their nests were constructed with techniques that required elaborate cooperation. They appeared to be slightly more intelligent than chimpanzees but no chimpanzee had ever used the kind of communication system they had developed. Their linguistic abilities couldn't be compared to anything humans had encountered on Earth.

The lakenesters weren't the only creatures on Itoko who had developed complicated vocal systems. The exploration surveys had discovered three other organisms that had become dependent on their ability to communicate. The packhunters that roamed across most of the planet's single continent seemed to be the most developed example. One of the probes had caught a brief glimpse of packhunters launching a coordinated attack on a lakenester stronghold, complete with wide flanking movements and intense assaults at single points.

Why had so many species developed the same ability? Was there some common genetic trait? Had the pressures of competition somehow pushed entirely different evolutionary lines in the same direction? Had the lakenesters become communicators because it was their best defense against the coordinated attacks of the packhunters?

In the solar system, Davin had been an experimental ethologist. He had designed organisms with certain qualities and watched them interact with mammoth artificial habitats. Here, he was exploring mysteries that had been created by the random, unpredictable process of natural selection. This lonely lakeshore, three thousand kilometers from the primary human base camp, was the most exciting place he had ever seen. For the first time in the history of his discipline, ethologists were studying the behavior of life forms that had been produced by a completely different evolutionary history.

The top screen on his bank was an oversized rectangle that displayed the current position of every animal in the nest. The computer took in all the information coming from the probes and assembled it into a complete picture. On the top screen, Davin could see the overall pattern in the lakenesters' project. On the other screens, he could observe the small scale maneuvering that made it all happen. The lakenesters had a social organization that resembled the system employed by the terrestrial apes called bonobos. A committee of females dominated the nest with techniques that included sexual rewards, coordinated acts of violence, and behavior that seemed to resemble cajoling and even joshing. Right now the "committee members" seemed to be all over the place.

Davin frowned. His attention jumped to the screen that was tracking his wife. Lizera was wading through grass that rose above her waist. The camera was angling to the left as it followed her. It should have been panning upward, toward the top of the screen.

He widened the view and discovered that she had already put ten meters between herself and the path. Her guardcats were rearing up on

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their hind legs so they could see over the grass. She started to move forward, toward the residential compound, and stopped after she'd taken three steps. She stared at something on her right and edged to the left.

Davin activated his communications implant. "What's going on? Why aren't you using the path?"

"There's something happening with the packhunters. They keep jumping up in front of me when I start toward the compound."

"When you start toward the compound? That's the only time they do it?"

"Some of them just jumped up when I started walking back to the path."

"How many do you see when they jump up?"

"It's just four or five when they jump up. But I think I've got the whole pack around me. I can hear them all around me."

"It sounds like they're herding you, doesn't it?"

"Just like they herd their prey animals? Do you really think they'd do that?"

The packhunters were the size of small terrestrial pigs. They had fangs and claws but they weren't particularly strong or fast. They killed larger animals by harassing them until they were too exhausted to struggle.

Davin stared at his screenbank. Three of the lakenester females were chattering at a young male-female pair.

"Stay there. I'll be there in a minute."

"Can't I just keep pushing forward, Davin? They're used to frightening animals. They might not attack if I just kept coming."

"We don't know how they're going to act. I'll bring the other two cats. We'll have them and two guns."

Davin's outdoor equipment was stored on a hanger and shelf arrangement near the door. He kept his eyes on the screens while he worked his shoulders into his armored coat. His upper body had been bulking up ever since he had started working in the planet's gravitational field. His parents had opted for a muscular body type when they had chosen his specifications and the extra gravity had given him an exaggerated version of their choice.

"You should have alerted me as soon as this happened," Davin said.

"I didn't want you to leave the tower. Not now."

He settled the sighting glasses into position and verified they were calibrated with his eye movements. "It's all being recorded. I won't lose a thing."

The wind would have caught an Earth-reared human by surprise. From inside the tower, the grass had looked as if it was swaying in response to a moderate terrestrial wind. On Itoko, the grasses were made of stiffer stuff. The planet moved through its seasons twice as fast as Earth did. The rapid changes in climate produced powerful air movements.

His guardcats fell into position front and back as he started loping toward Lizera. In the grass, about a hundred meters out, raspy voices exchanged rapid-fire signals. Two round, khaki-colored heads bobbed above

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the grass on his left. Another head popped up on his right. He looked back and glimpsed a flash of movement.

He subvocalized the nonsense word that activated his communications implant. "It looks like they're herding me, too. I don't see any of them in front of me. It looks like they're trying to herd me toward you."

Lizera chuckled. "Does that mean they think we're harmless?"

"It could. It would certainly give us an advantage if it did."

"I'm sorry, Davin. I didn't mean to cause you so much trouble. I tried to get around them."

"It's all right. I just wish I knew why they suddenly decided to turn on us."

"Is it possible we smell different? Did we eat something different?"

Davin had activated his auxiliary intelligence as he ran. He had been exchanging data with the three research teams that were studying the packhunters. Now he let his retrieval program run through all his internal packhunter files, searching for clues to the sudden change in the creatures' behavior. So far, he had only had two hostile encounters with the packhunters. The local pack had made two attempts to enter the compound. The attack had stopped, both times, when the electric hedge had hit the intruders with near-lethal jolts.

Davin had been confident that the packhunters had assaulted the hedge because it had usurped one of their established observation points. There had been no indication they were interested in him or Lizera. He had walked between the tower and the compound for three tendays before he had let Lizera make the trip. The packhunters had started losing interest before the end of the first tenday. Up until now, it had seemed safe to assume their appetites were linked to the odors emitted by the native biochemistry.

The best information on the packhunters had been produced by a couple who were studying them on the other side of the continent, in an area just north of the central mountains. The couple had paired on the ship, sometime during the last thirty years of the voyage. They had never done any ethological research, but they had thought it would be a good way to familiarize themselves with the planet. They had come to Davin for mentoring when one of his awake periods had overlapped one of theirs. The woman was the adventurer in the pair. The man seemed to be following her lead. They had smiled, now and then, when Davin had let his enthusiasm for his subject run away with him. They had always been polite to Lizera.

The packhunters were very territorial. The packs had a dominant male and female, and the males were primarily responsible for the defense of the territory. The dominant female and her subordinate females did most of the hunting. Their major prey animal in this part of the continent was a horned creature about five times their size. Their relationship with the prey animal had developed some of the characteristics of a shepherd relationship. They harried the prey animals away from the territorial borders when they wandered too close. They attacked solitary hunters such as the big, muscular predators who occasionally ventured out of the mountain forests.

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Davin was studying the lakenesters, but he had kept an eye on the packhunters and passed his observations to the packhunter specialists. Two tendays ago, when the trees were still losing their leaves, he had realized that there had been a big drop in the number of prey animals he observed. Then he had spotted two dead packhunters lying near the lake. He had noted, through his telescope, that they both had twisted, damaged legs. Had another pack invaded the territory and driven off the local herd? The packhunter researchers had all plagued him for more information. Lizera had spent several days observing the packhunters from the tower. But Davin didn't have the equipment to observe wide-ranging organisms.

If an invading pack really had driven off the prey animals, it would be the first time anyone had observed serious intra-species aggression among packhunters. The packhunter researchers all agreed that would indicate inter-pack relations were more complex than they had realized. *We've been assuming they occasionally fight over territory,* one of them had noted. *Now we're discovering they may engage in rustling behavior.*

Were the packhunters hungry enough that they were willing to attack a pair of chemically strange bipeds? Could their intelligence override the information provided by their senses?

Davin stopped beside Lizera. Most of the packhunters were hidden by the grass, but he was surrounded by their voices—a continuous, unbroken din of rasping vocalizations. The packhunter observers had decided that the packs used a pseudo-language composed of nine syllables arranged in over two hundred combinations. Eighty of the combinations could be used to denote position and direction. Some of the observers had detected indications that the dominant female was the coordinator. She could hold every animal's position in her head, according to that theory, and issue orders that created organized attacks. Others felt the coordination was more informal. The packhunters listened to each other, they argued, and each animal responded to the actions of the others.

Davin's observations of the lakenesters indicated that his animals used both methods. Sometimes the dominant females seemed to issue direct orders to their underlings. Other times, everybody seemed to just know what to do.

Signals passed between Davin's communication implant and the guardcats' control units. Two of the guardcats took up positions in the rear. The other two posted themselves on the sides.

"This may explain why there's so much activity in the nest," Davin said. "The nesters may have sensed the packhunters are getting more aggressive. If the packhunters' meat supply got herded away. . . ."

Lizera nodded. She never commented on Davin's scientific speculations. She understood that he just needed to know someone was listening to him.

Davin turned his attention to his auxiliary intelligence and checked his physiological status charts. He had suspended his fatigue feedback responses when the lakenesters had started their surge of activity. If he didn't scan his charts every ten or fifteen minutes, he would keep going until he collapsed.

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"I think we should try your idea," Davin said. "We should run at them as fast as we can. And shoot them if they get in our way. Do you think you can stick with me?"

"I'll stay as close to you as I can."

She wasn't afraid. She had only been given a rudimentary capacity for fear. She wouldn't panic just because she was under a lot of pressure, either. She would stay calm and rational.

Overall, she had very limited survival responses. Davin had never thought of it that way, but it was true. He was just as calm as she was but he could sense the anxieties his modifications were controlling. His brain manufactured peptides that settled a layer of calm over his emotions when he was faced with a crisis. But the other emotions were still there. That was a standard genetic modification. Lizera's genetic designers had assumed she would never have to face physical danger. They had strengthened the emotional responses that would help her do her job and neglected—or even weakened—any responses that might interfere.

Davin studied the grass through his sighting glasses. "I'll shoot the animals directly in front of me. You take anything you see on the left front. That way we won't waste shots firing at the same targets."

She looked up at him. Her eyes looked very large. "Are you sure you have the energy reserves, Davin? You haven't slept since the lakenesters started this new phase. You've been working without a break for over a hundred hours. You haven't been eating that much either. I've watched you."

"I just checked. I'm fine."

"I could run at them by myself. While you stand back and keep me covered."

"We'll do it together. This is no time to take chances. We don't know what's going on."

He turned away from her. Commands flowed from his communications implant to the guardcats. "Let's go."

Four packhunters rose above the grass before he finished his third stride. They jumped straight up with their lips pulled back over their teeth. Screechy wails replaced the rasps.

Individually, they didn't look that dangerous. Their faces resembled scaled-up versions of the miniature mammals the genetic designers had created for people who lived in cramped quarters and liked lovable, perennially juvenile animals. They had flat snouts and big eyes. Their ears were erect and alert. Their round bodies were covered with a sleek material that looked as if it would evoke a pleasant response if you stroked it. Individually, they were about as threatening as an unarmed child.

He rested the sighting glasses on the animal directly in front of him. His brain radioed a fire command to the gun. His arms moved the gun across the packhunter. Two shots cracked at the moment the gun decided it was properly aligned with the target selected by the glasses.

The packhunter's wail ended in an abrupt, choked-off gasp. Davin turned his glasses on the animal on its right. He was holding the gun with two hands, left hand on the barrel, to steady it against the recoil. In

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the solar system, he had spent his whole life in windless, hollowed-out asteroids. The guns he had fired had hurled lightweight anesthetic pellets. The working components in the pellets had been molecular machines that neutralized neurotransmitters. On Itoko, the pellets had to be heavier and the biochemists still hadn't analyzed the structures of most of the local biological molecules. The moles in his pellets were crude devices that indiscriminately destroyed any big molecules they encountered.

A message from the left guardcat grabbed his attention before he could fire. He swung around and discovered the cat was embroiled in combat. He couldn't see all the details through the grass, but it looked as if it was being attacked by four packhunters. His glasses settled on a patch of khaki flank. The gun fired twice. The packhunter's back arched. He turned his glasses toward the next target he had selected and found he had nothing to shoot at. The other three packhunters had disappeared into the grass.

The cat hobbled forward in response to Davin's continuing command to keep advancing. He ran to it through the grass and saw it was dragging its left rear leg.

He ordered a full-alert halt. The cats fell into on guard positions and he bent over the wounded animal.

The euthanasia command required the cat's ID and two other code words. He subvocalized them methodically, carefully waiting for the confirming pings.

He stood up and tried to get a solid grip on the situation. Lizera had been a good three strides behind him when he had stopped the advance. She was a healthy woman with a lot of stamina, but her hippy body wasn't built for running.

"I'm going to put the cats at our sides and our rear," he said. "I think we should move forward even if the packhunters attack the cats. They don't know what the guns can do. That's our secret weapon. They seem to understand that the cats are a threat. They don't know how dangerous *we* are."

He pointed at a spot about two steps to his left. "I think you should position yourself there. I'll pace myself to you. Try to move as fast as you can. Don't wear yourself out—just try to push yourself some."

Lizera waded through the grass and placed herself where he wanted her. He lowered his head and concentrated on the ceaseless clamor from the packhunters. There were five animals in front of them—maybe six.

This time, he deliberately took shorter steps. His gun cracked as soon as the first heads appeared over the grass. The animal he was firing at dropped and he swung on the animal on its left. He couldn't hear Lizera's gun over the din but he saw the animal closest to her stretch to its full length in the middle of a leap.

The grass was thrashing above the first packhunter he had shot. The second target dropped as if the moles had touched something vital as soon as they made contact. The three cats were all signaling they were under attack. On his right, through the grass, he could see the guardcat on that flank twisting and clawing.

His emotional enhancements were performing just as if they were sup-

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posed to. He had never been in physical danger before but he was responding as if he were involved in an intense, highly competitive game that he desperately wanted to win. He was totally focused on the situation he was facing, but there was no danger he would be paralyzed by fear.

His implant pinged. A signal from the rear cat's control unit advised him the cat was no longer effective. Wails rose behind him. He looked back and located four places where the packhunters were creating ripples as they plowed through the grass.

Lizera had fallen a step behind, in spite of his best efforts to match her pace. Davin lurched across the distance between them and took up a position behind her. He stepped backward with his eyes on the oncoming ripples.

"Keep moving forward. There's four of them attacking our rear. I'm certain they're still trying to harass us. They don't come in for the kill until their prey animal starts to behave like it's exhausted."

"Is the rear cat dead?"

"Probably."

"What side should I take?"

Davin smiled. She might not be a runner but her brain could size up a tactical situation just as well as his could—even if she normally let him take the lead.

"Left. You fire at any animals on your left and our front. I'll take my left and our rear."

The ripples split about thirty meters out. Two went right, one left. The fourth came straight at him. Davin settled his sighting glasses on a point just in front of the ripple. Had any of the packhunter researchers mentioned that they switched to wails when they charged? This was not, obviously, the most felicitous moment to search his internal files.

His eyes picked up their first glimpse of a hurtling khaki head. He started to fire and then repressed the command. The animal had veered off to his right. Another incoming ripple caught his attention on his left and he twisted around and kept it in his sights until it, too, veered away.

The four packhunters harried their quarry for almost ten minutes. They coordinated their rushes so that two animals were always charging in at the same time. The rest of the pack formed a wide outer ring around the two humans and kept up their endless exchange of signals. Heads popped above the grass as if they were making quick observations and relaying the information to the four animals who were conducting the actual attacks. It was a time-consuming hunting technique, but Davin could see its advantages. He had watched the lakenesters' defensive behavior when they came on land searching for the roots and shrubs they lived on. They always moved in groups of three or four, and they had claws and teeth that could inflict serious wounds. The packhunters' tactics would offer the meat-eaters the maximum gain with the minimum threat of injury. If the prey animals dropped their guard, the quartet could be on them in seconds. If the prey animals kept circling and maneuvering, they would eventually succumb to exhaustion.

A second quartet charged in as soon as the first one withdrew. Lizera had managed to kill one animal as it turned away from them. She had

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advanced about fifteen steps with Davin edging along backward behind her. Davin kept trying to move faster but he couldn't. The packhunters might be harassing them but he couldn't just assume they would keep veering away if he and Lizera broke into an all-out run. The animals were making real threats.

It had been Lizera's body-type that had first attracted Davin. Soft flesh and rounded curves might not maximize a woman's ability to run, but they were wonderful physical attributes if you were looking for someone you could hold and caress. Lizera had been the hostess in charge of a twelve-suite bloc in her resort. She had been the human interface between the guests and the software that actually ran the place—the personable, infinitely unruffled, unsimulated personality who appeared at your door when you wanted a special service or needed help with a malfunction. The resort had run a routine databank check on Davin and assigned him to a bloc run by a woman who matched the physical/personality type he seemed to prefer.

Davin had asked for only one modification when he decided to marry her. From now on, he would be the primary object of her urge to accommodate and get along. Lizera had agreed, and the combine that ran the resort put her through a twelve-eday modification. A segment of her postnatal personality processing was gently removed and a new module was added. The whole procedure was strictly voluntary. There was no coercion. Lizera wanted to be married, the combine received a third of Davin's monetary wealth.

It had seemed like a reasonable thing to do at the time. Davin had already been through three marriages and several unsuccessful pairings. He knew several other people, of both sexes, who had settled into tranquil relationships with geisha companions. He knew there was a prejudice against it, but he had decided that the benefits would outweigh the social disapproval he would encounter. Lizera wouldn't orate about his "fondness for social isolation" the way his first wife had. She wouldn't fret, like his third wife, because he left her to her own devices when he became absorbed in his research.

"How many do we have to shoot before they leave us alone?" Lizera said. "Shouldn't we reach a limit at some point?"

"I'm going to call for help. This isn't going to be as easy as I thought it would be."

"They seem so intelligent. You'd think they'd figure out what the guns can do."

The compound contained a relay to the communications satellites that the debarkation committee had posted shortly after the starship orbited the planet. Davin activated the emergency routine in his communications implant and paired the transmission with a request for information on the positions of all the currently operational air vehicles.

The Voice of the communications system advised him his call was being answered by Wangessi Mazelka. It was a name that evoked a catalog of associations.

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"Greetings, Davin. What's the problem?"

Davin followed a ripple with his glasses, watching for a clear shot at a patch of hide. The second packhunter quartet was using a different tactic. They came in very fast, one after the other, without let-up, but their rushes ended when they were still five meters out.

"There's been a change in the packhunters' behavior. They've started attacking us. There's a possibility they're going after us because their main food supply got run off a few days ago. We're surrounded out in the open. Between our compound and the observation tower I've been using. I thought we could fight our way free but we're having problems. They've already killed all four of our guardcats. Can you get us help before it gets dark?"

Davin's auxiliary intelligence had transmitted a map to his brain. The nearest air vehicle was an airship that was located about two hundred and fifty kilometers to the east—about two hours' travel time, given neutral winds. The second closest vehicle was an airship that was about four hours to the south.

"What kind of help do you need?"

"We just need a pickup that will get us back to the compound. That's all it will take."

"For two people?"

Davin settled his glasses on a second incoming ripple. The animal he had been following had veered off to the right.

He cut the link to his implant. "Keep moving forward," he said to Lizera. "Take every bit of ground you can."

He turned his attention back to Wangessi. "Lizera was walking back to the compound from the tower when they attacked. I thought the two of us could break through their ring. But they're harder to deal with than I thought. Right now they've practically got us immobilized. We're barely making progress."

"You can't just shoot them?"

"We've killed six so far."

"And they still haven't learned what the guns can do?"

Lizera's gun cracked. She took two long strides and Davin threw a glance over his shoulder and backed up after her.

"I got him," Lizera said. "He's thrashing around in the grass."

"It's going to be dark in about three hours," Davin told Wangessi. "The *North Wind* could get to us in about two hours. It looks to me like we're going to need it."

Wangessi paused. "The *North Wind* is on a priority one mission, Davin. I can't divert it without asking for authority."

"And how long will that take?"

"*If* I can get the authority—*if*—it will be about an hour. But I should warn you—don't assume I can get it."

"You've got two people being attacked in an open field!"

"The *North Wind* is taking supplies all the way to North Inlet. We're talking about a gasbag that's operating at maximum range, Davin. It's bucking the wind all the way. If we divert it—we may have to recall it and give the engines a full recharge."

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Three ripples were racing back to the outer circle. Four more ripples were cutting toward them.

"I'm taking a step," Lizera said. "There's a little hump you need to step over."

Davin raised his right leg and backed up with her. He gave his auxiliary intelligence an order and it started rummaging through the public files. The *North Wind* was carrying three passengers. The second name on the list was a brain-machine specialist named G.G. Ying.

"Can you give it a try?" Davin said.

"The *Yellow Grass Express* is only four hours away. You'll just be saving an hour if we discuss your request for an hour and divert the *North Wind*."

"I'd still appreciate it if you'd give it a try."

"It's not going to be an easy case to make, Davin. You've got night vision modules. I presume you're properly armored. You do have your boots on, right? And your armored coats?"

"We never go out in the open without them. I wouldn't have called you if we were just facing half a dozen of the things. We're fighting a large, well-coordinated pack. I don't know what these things are capable of."

"I can see why you're worried. I'd probably call for help in the same situation. Why take chances? Unfortunately, I can see how the directors might have other ideas."

"I'm having enough trouble seeing them in the grass now. If they came at us in the night—the best night vision glasses in the arsenal wouldn't be good enough in that situation."

"I'm just giving you my best opinion. If you want me to ask for the closest ship, I will. It's up to you. "

"Then please consider this a formal request for the quickest help available. You might point out that we may have to kill every animal in the pack if they keep on behaving the way they've been behaving."

"I'll do what I can, Davin. If that's your decision. . . ."

Davin's implant had already alerted G.G. Ying. She responded as soon as Wangessi cut the link and Davin filled her in on the situation.

"You should have asked for the *Yellow Grass*. You'll be lucky if Wangessi only stalls for an hour."

"That's why I'm calling you. If you override the Voice on your ship—and start it moving this way before he gets the authorization—"

"I'm taking a step," Lizera said.

Davin watched a ripple on his left flank as he eased himself back. G.G. still hadn't answered him when he finished the step.

"There's two other passengers on this ship, Davin. What am I supposed to tell them?"

"You don't need their permission to override the Voice. Anybody can do it."

"That's not the issue. They've got business, too. They've got a right to be involved in the decision."

"You've got two people in serious danger. Don't you think that will mean anything to them?"

"At this moment, Davin, I don't know what it would mean to anybody. You've been sitting out there all by yourself for almost twenty tendays. I

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don't think you realize how much influence the moral crusaders have been piling up. Do you think I'd be taking this trip all by myself if I could have brought Lan?"

"You're going to have to change course anyway when you get the authorization. You'll just be anticipating it—so you can get here before nightfall."

"You're not hearing what I'm saying. I didn't even ask them if I could bring Lan. I'm going to be spending five tendays all by myself when there's absolutely no need for it. They could have put another passenger on this gasbag without dropping a single kilo of cargo. Wangessi isn't your only problem. Nobody of any importance is going to get excited if we and our disturbing little geishas vanish from the scene. Most of the rest of the populace will just shrug it off and attend to their own business."

Davin's gun cracked. His target had been a small, barely visible patch of khaki but he had given the fire order anyway.

"I want to help you," G.G. said. "I want to help you. But I wouldn't be doing either of us one atom of good if I ignored the present political situation and pulled this ship off course. I'd just be giving them a chance to attack me. There's a lot of decent people in this community. But right now the fanatics seem to be in charge. I'm sorry I can't help you. But I can't. Believe me—I can't."

"The connection has been terminated," the Voice of Davin's implant advised him.

"I'm taking a step," Lizera said.

Davin had been running experiments for almost thirty years when he married Lizera. The two artificial habitats he worked with had been created by communities of engineers and life scientists who had shaped them over four decades. The interiors of two asteroids had been transformed into complex environments occupying thousands of cubic kilometers. His solar system career had ended when both communities had rejected his latest research proposals. The woman who brought him the second rejection explained the situation in words that had obviously been planned and rehearsed.

"The feelings on this issue are very strong," the woman said. "We realize you aren't the only person in the solar system with this kind of marital arrangement. The committee wants you to know it feels your work has been exceptionally creative—extremely promising. But there are people on the committee who feel they can't compromise. Our entire organizational structure would collapse if you continued working with us over their objections."

Davin had first met G.G. Ying when she had approached him at the beginning of his second awake on the ship. She had been forming an "informal support network" for people who shared their "problem with social attitudes."

"We got on this ship because they had some very tolerant people on the selection committee," G.G. said. "But don't think that's going to last. There are going to be power shifts once we reach our destination. We've violated a taboo that turns millions of people into zealots."

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There had been four thousand people on the ship. Forty-three had geisha spouses or sexual companions. Davin stayed on the fringes of G.G.'s group but he knew it was necessary. He had been forced out of the solar system, after all, by the reactions of the "zealots."

Davin had been given a muscular body because his father had believed muscle was still useful, even when you lived in low-gravity environments. His genetic designer had maximized his intelligence because both his parents had known he would be competing with contemporaries whose parents had maximized *their* intelligence. He could concentrate on one subject for days at a time because his mother had insisted that the ability to concentrate was just as important as intelligence. He felt comfortable in social groups because his father had felt amiability was another useful trait.

Human beings had been debating the rights and wrongs of personality modification and genetic enhancement since they had first acquired the ability to remake themselves. A consensus had been arrived at—a consensus that was embodied in laws and social customs that were accepted in every major society in the solar system. Davin accepted the consensus. He supported the laws. "Human beings are an end, not a means," Davin had argued in his youthful discussions. "My parents gave me modifications that would help *me* make *my* way in the world. They didn't try to create someone who would satisfy *their* whims. And *their* needs."

Davin had looked up the history of the word geisha. Originally, it had referred to a woman who had been trained to be a pleasing companion to men. There had even been an indication that the companionship didn't have to involve sex. It had only become a term of contempt in the last two hundred years, as humans had mastered the physiological and post-natal factors that shaped personality.

He had made three attempts at marriage. His second marriage had lasted over twelve years. No one had designed a woman just for him. Lizera had already existed when he had made his bargain with her employers. She had been created in an illegal people shop years before he met her. She had only made one modification just for him. And she had done it voluntarily.

"*Davin*. In front. *Look*."

Davin turned his head. Twelve ripples were arrowing toward Lizera. Her head moved from side to side as she trained her sighting glasses on the middle four.

Davin made a half turn, so he could concentrate on the front and keep an eye on the rear. The twelve wails interlaced like the voices in the Bach fugues Lizera played on her simulator.

His glasses rested on a round khaki face. His gun cracked. Lizera fired. His eyes searched for another target.

The ripples veered away. His brain registered a glimpse of flank and the gun fired again.

"I'm going to run forward," Lizera said. "While they're turning away from us."

She lurched forward before she had finished talking. The stream at the

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bottom of the hill was only a couple of hundred meters away. Davin ran along behind her, scuttling sideways every other step so he could watch their rear. It was an awkward way to run but he stayed with her.

"Go for the stream," Davin said. "Forget the bridge. We'll wade the stream."

They would still have another three hundred meters to go when they crossed the stream. The packhunters could cross the stream, too, and block their front again. But for now the stream was a goal. For now he could forget about what happened after they crossed it.

"On the left front," Lizera said. "Four."

Lizera was responding to the situation as if she had spent her whole life fighting strange animals. And why shouldn't she? At the resort, she had managed complex machine systems and dealt with the unpredictable crises created by human emotions.

Davin turned and spotted the four ripples. This time there was no wailing. The only animals who were making comments were the packhunters in the outer circle.

The two ripples on the flanks turned slightly as they reached the ten meter mark. Davin automatically assumed they were veering. Then he realized they weren't. They were racing toward their quarry from four different angles.

He settled his glasses on one of the center ripples. A tan shape burst from the grass. His gun cracked. The animal stumbled toward him, carried forward by the impetus of its charge, and Davin jumped back.

A second animal darted past his leg. It turned its head as it ran past and slashed at his coat with its fangs. He swung the gun around but it disappeared into the grass before he could fire. The animal he had shot was thrashing a step from his boots. Its left eye looked up at him.

Lizera had already started running toward the stream. The animal she had hit had stopped moving. The moles had opened a huge hole in the right side of its skull. Davin hustled after Lizera and caught up with her before she had traveled five more steps. Behind him, the two animals that had survived the attack were rasping messages at their packmates.

"Four on the left front," Lizera said. "Four more on the center front."

"Keep running."

This time the attackers started rasping as they approached the ten meter point. They widened the distance between ripples and closed in with their voices clattering like high-speed machines.

The first leap overwhelmed the chemical alterations that were supposed to be controlling Davin's startle reaction. He jumped back as soon as he saw the compact khaki missile hurtling toward his face. His elbow stabbed into Lizera's side.

Two more animals flew at him in a tightly bunched pair. This time his emotional modifications managed to assert themselves. The gun came up as he stepped into their leap. He had seen recordings of this kind of attack. Normally the packhunters finished their standard prey animal with runs at the quarry's legs. With larger animals, they sometimes took to the air and tried to weaken the prey animal by savaging its back.

He fired two shots at the target on the right and twisted out of the way.

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The animal he had shot crumpled onto its side as it hit the ground. The other animal disappeared into the grass.

"Watch your right," Davin said.

Four more ripples were plowing toward them. The gabfest in the outer circle rose to a crescendo. Four khaki missiles burst out of the grass at the same time. Davin's gun cracked. A solid mass slammed into his chest.

Davin stumbled back. Claws scraped on his coat. He stretched his arm out to the side and managed to point the gun at the thing's shoulder. His brain transmitted a fire command. A round face looked up at him. The animal's mouth opened. It slid down his coat and he lurched away from it. Lizera was lying on her back with two packhunters covering most of her body. She had stuck her right arm out of the pile and maneuvered her gun into a firing position next to the packhunter who was attacking her upper body. Davin trained his gun on the other animal and fired two bursts.

Four blotches appeared on the animal's back. Its head snapped around. The area behind its front shoulders collapsed as if some invisible object had hammered it with bone-breaking force. It collapsed on top of Lizera with its voice rasping out a string of syllables.

Davin grabbed the animal by its neck and jerked it off Lizera. She had killed the other one and she was pulling herself out from under. The animal Davin had killed had pushed her coat up her leg, above her boots. Her thigh was covered with blood. Claw marks had created a pattern of lines in the blood.

Davin fought back the impulse to crouch beside her and examine the wound. He stayed on his feet and watched the grass for another attack. Lizera wiggled away from the animals and raised herself on her elbows. She pulled the coat higher and studied her leg.

"I can't make the knee bend," she said. "I think it ripped up some muscle. Or maybe a tendon. I can still wiggle my toes. But I can't make the rest of the leg do anything."

She had been given the standard pain and anti-shock enhancements, just like "proper" humans. She could uncouple the chemical pathways that produced pain. She could reduce major blood loss to a minor seep. The packhunter had turned her leg into a junk heap of blood and mangled flesh, but that was a minor matter. The medical unit in their compound contained routines that could replace entire limbs.

Davin glanced at the display on his gun. The cassette still held eight seconds of energy in its battery—enough to fire nearly eighty more rounds. The spare cassette in his right cargo pocket could fire another two hundred rounds.

He knelt beside Lizera. "Put your arm around my neck. Try to hold onto your gun with your other hand."

"That's stupid, Davin. You can't get past them carrying me."

He stared at her. He was already carrying an emotional overload. He would have been paralyzed if he had been functioning without his enhancements.

And now he had to cope with this.

Did she really consider herself *discardable?*

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He couldn't challenge her feelings. They were built into her. He had to accept them as a given. He had to start with a crazy premise and try to be logical. Factual. "We're just a hundred meters from the stream," he said. "We've been killing them right and left. This can't go on forever."

"And what do we do when we cross the stream? You're not being rational, Davin. We both know you could run right through them if you were out here by yourself."

He pulled her right arm around his neck. He fitted his shoulder under her arm and started to haul them both erect. "We'll try for that clump of trees on the other side of the stream. On top of that little rise. We'll get to that and wait to be rescued."

"Davin—"

"You can hold on and let me have both hands free to hold the gun. Or you can make me hold you. And force me to shoot with one hand."

Her arm tightened around his neck. She clutched at a fold of his coat to give herself better support.

"We must have killed a third of the things by now," Davin said. "They have to give up sooner or later."

"They're acting like those generals that kept throwing troops at the first automatic powder guns. They act so intelligent. And they still can't figure out what we're doing."

That's it. Just do that. Make conversation. Show me you're all right. Concentrate on that.

Three nights ago—before the lakenesters had started their new behavior pattern—he had put his work out of his mind and they had spent a long evening together. They drank teas that filled their little living space with warm, delicate odors. Lizera knelt behind her qin, in the classic fashion, while he sprawled in front of her and watched her fingers float across the long strings. A filmy robe hung from her shoulders. He could study the smoothness of her thighs, tightened by the kneeling position, as the folds of the robe shifted around her.

You didn't think of her thigh as a mechanism that moved her from one point to another when you watched her at moments like those.

He forced a heavy, lumbering trot out of his own muscles. There were five packhunters directly in front of him, judging by the racket. He tried to shoot at two of them when they jumped up but he couldn't bring the gun around in time.

Four ripples cleaved the grass on his right. "What's your gun good for?" Davin said.

"Six seconds."

"Start firing bursts at the ripple on the left. I'll fire at the other three. Don't try to conserve ammunition. Train your glasses on the ripple and keep sending fire commands."

He planted his own sighting glasses on the right center ripple. There was no command for continuous firing. You transmitted repeats of the fire command as fast as you could think it and the gun fired two-pellet bursts every time it located the target.

He turned away from the first ripple and started firing at the ripple next to it. There wasn't time to make sure he had damaged his first tar-

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get. He couldn't wait for the animals to break cover. He couldn't stop a flying assault with Lizera clinging to him.

The fourth animal soared out of the grass as he was turning his glasses on it. A khaki ball hurtled toward his face. He pressed his left hand against Lizera's side and pushed her away from him. The gun cracked.

He dropped to one knee and threw himself on top of Lizera. The animal landed two steps from his head. Clumps of dirt and grass spattered on his coat. He lifted his head and jumped up as soon as he realized the packhunter was clawing the ground as it died.

He pressed the release button on the side of the gun. The empty cassette popped out. He slipped the spare into the slot. He scanned the grass for more ripples.

He knelt beside Lizera and helped her drape her arm over his shoulder. He stood up and lunged toward the stream. Khaki heads bobbed above the grass in front of him. The clamor rose to another crescendo.

"If I could just locate the dominant female," Davin said. "If we could eliminate her. . . ."

"She's probably keeping low. Like most generals."

"And keeping everybody's position in her head? From their signals? It's possible. But it's an idea with a lot of implications—level of intelligence, information-processing ability. . . . It could also explain why they keep coming. She isn't seeing what's happening. She just knows some of them are dying."

Lizera laughed. "Don't you ever stop working, Davin? Are you going to post a paper on this?"

Once again he was running—lurching, to be more precise—toward the animals directly in front of him. His gun cracked every time he saw a head. The grass shook where one had dropped down and he veered a few degrees to the right and ran straight at it.

"We may have a hole there. Watch our left."

The noise rose to a crescendo. The circle seemed to be getting smaller. He got a brief glance of the mangled head of the animal he had hit. Then he was splashing through the stream, feeling the water rise to his knees as they approached the center.

Splashes erupted on both sides. The pack was racing across the stream to get ahead of him. Eyes stared at him as they hurried across. Voices chatted up and down the line.

"It looks like they're back to trying to run us into the ground," Davin said.

"Maybe they're learning something after all."

Could the packhunters be organized according to the queen bee pattern? Had the dominant female been stubbornly following tactics that had worked in the past because she wasn't concerned about casualties?

If she was behaving like a queen bee, her primary concern could be her personal survival and the survival of her own young. Casualties weakened the pack, but they also that there would be fewer mouths when they finally settled down to dinner.

There was a natural tendency to assume that a highly developed language had to be associated with intelligence. But did that have to be true?

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Bees had language, after all. Could an animal use language to coordinate a library of stereotyped attacks? If you assumed that their linguistic abilities used up most of their brain space . . .

He struggled through the bushes that crowded the edge of the stream. Watery ground sucked at his boots. The trees he had picked for a goal belonged to a stubby, multi-trunked species that had already lost most of its leaves. The rise was only four steps high, and it was located just two steps beyond the bushes.

He looked back as he reached the top and brought the gun around one handed. Two animals were crossing the stream behind him. He fired three bursts and they both collapsed before they reached the edge of the water.

There were four trees in the cluster. The biggest was about twice as tall as Davin. Most of the packhunters were spread out in an arc on this side of the stream, judging by the racket and the heads that popped above the grass. Two or three of them seemed to be posted on the other side of the stream.

Davin glanced at the sun. "Do they sound like they're feeling a little less energetic?"

"Perhaps. It's possible."

"We've still got almost two hours to night. I'll give G.G. another call. If they think they've got us cornered . . . "

Lizera shrugged. "Do you think I can lie down? I think we should both be conserving energy."

Davin lowered her to the ground as he activated his communications implant. She rested her back against a tree trunk and he stood up and started systematically monitoring the landscape.

He hadn't checked his status charts when he'd started carrying her. Now he gave them a quick look and got the answer he had expected. He was approaching the edge of the yellow zone. If he had taken a few more steps, his auxiliary intelligence would have started nagging him with a series of one-minute warnings.

He wouldn't collapse merely because his muscles had missed three sleep periods. The human body could tolerate a hundred hours without sleep. The big problem was the enhancements that removed toxins from his brain. Everything had its price. The enhancements kept his brain cells neat and well scrubbed, but they also placed a critical extra demand on his energy reservoirs.

He dictated a description of their situation and transmitted copies to G.G. Ying and Wangessi Mazelka. He waited for two minutes, timing himself by his clock implant, and called G.G. direct.

G.G. answered his third try. "The answer is still no, Davin. Get me an order from the proper authorities and I'll turn this thing around the moment I know it's real. But I'm not going to do it on my own. That's exactly what people like Wangessi are waiting for—a perfect excuse to squash the most active person in our group."

"She can't walk, G.G. I'm not embellishing the situation. I had to haul her the last hundred meters. I'll have to haul her another three hundred meters uphill if we don't get help."

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"But *you're* unwounded. *You're* in one piece. And I gather *you* aren't running out of ammunition."

Davin turned away from Lizera. He was holding himself rigid while he subvocalized, but he knew she could pick up every flicker of emotion that crossed his face. Her ability to read body language had been an important part of her design specifications.

"You said we would help each other," Davin said. "We were all supposed to help each other."

"And how much help have you given the group? If you'd kept in touch with us while you were out there in the field pursuing your scientific ambitions, you might have some idea what we're up against. Have you heard from Wangessi yet? Did he get back to you the moment he got your latest message?"

"I'm not going to leave Lizera lying here. What am I supposed to do? Sit up there in the compound and listen while they tear her to pieces?"

"I can tell you exactly what Wangessi's thinking right now—him and anybody else he's consulted. You got this far dragging her—you can probably go the rest of the way by yourself. You must have killed almost half of those things by now. You've still got plenty of ammunition. I can guarantee you he's not worried about all the complaints he'll get if your *wife* has a fatal encounter with the local wildlife. Right now I'd be surprised if twelve people raised an objection if *anything* happened to Lizera. As far as Wangessi and most of the people in this community are concerned, you should tell her to put herself to sleep and mow down the rest of the pack while you run through it. You should drop her in exactly the same way you'd drop any other bundle you were trying to carry."

"Would you leave Lan?"

"In your situation—yes."

"You didn't even hesitate!"

"I don't have the kind of feelings you seem to."

"She's a *human being.* She's just like you and me."

"That's not the issue."

"Then what *is?*"

"I acquired Lan because he satisfies my emotional needs. In the same way Lizera satisfies your needs. It's not the kind of thing people die for."

"It's the kind of thing they let someone *else* die for?"

"Do you have any idea what might happen to Lan if I diverted this ship just to help you save Lizera? Has it occurred to you that might be one of the major reasons I'm not helping you?"

"But you think I should let Lizera die now? You think I should just run off and let these animals rip her to pieces?"

"I think you should understand that Wangessi isn't going to divert this airship just to help you keep Lizera alive. I think you should understand that I'm not going to do something that could be turned into the kind of inflammatory incident Wangessi and his gang have been looking for. If I diverted this ship and saved you and Lizera, they would just argue that it wasn't necessary—that it's exactly the kind of thing self-indulgent people like us do. There would be no serious objection to any penalties they inflicted on us."

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Davin could visualize the look on G.G.'s face—the look she put on whenever she lectured him about the nature of reality. To her, he was a monomaniac who was pathologically absorbed in his intellectual interests. He tended to think that everything would work out, she argued. He underestimated the opposition he would encounter.

To him, on the other hand, she was the kind of person who thought that meetings and political harangues were the greatest recreation mankind had ever invented. If she hadn't been leading their group, she would have found another band of persecuted souls and filled her life with another set of meetings and squabbles.

They were both right, of course. He shouldn't have been surprised by the reactions he had encountered when he had married Lizera. He had been surrounded by warning signs. Instead, he had focused on the people who had acquired geishas as spouses or concubines and assumed that their existence proved the problems would be minor.

On the ship, during their first awake, Davin and Lizera had both been assigned to the staff that monitored the induced-hibernation containers. For one long stretch—over fifteen tendays—they had been rostered on different shifts. The assignment officer had smiled when Davin asked him why they couldn't work on the same schedule. Then he asked Davin if he ever went in for loans.

There had been a moment when Davin had felt his hands start to move. Then his enhancements had taken over. A flood of calming molecules had spread through his brain and he had walked away. He had still been brooding about the incident when G.G. had told him she was organizing her "support group."

Wangessi had been one of the ship's biggest committee joiners. Usually he ended up on the kind of committees that set policy and allocated jobs. You wouldn't find him in the induced-hibernation compartments, floating from container to container verifying that the readings on the instruments matched the readings on a portable checkup unit. After planetfall, Wangessi had found a place on the committee that allocated energy and other resources. If it hadn't been for Wangessi's committee, Davin and Lizera could have traveled between the compound and the tower in a small enclosed vehicle. They traveled on foot because Davin had been given half the energy allotment he had asked for.

Their research station drew its power from two sources—the solar panels Davin had created with their molecular fabricator and the recharged batteries the central base lifted in by gasbag. The batteries were based on the most efficient design the human race had come up with by the time their ship left the solar system. The design had been upgraded regularly as the ship had received messages from Earth as it crawled across the light years. Davin's original proposal had requested four batteries every eight tendays. The committee had told him the airship would bring him three batteries every twelve tendays.

Davin had looked at the budgets for the other ethology researchers. They were all getting almost twice as many battery deliveries as he was. He asked for a personal meeting with a member of the committee.

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Wangessi saw him after a delay that lasted a tenday. "The other researchers are studying packhunters," Wangessi said. "They need to follow them all over their territory. You've chosen a species that stays close to its habitat."

"I understand that. But this budget means we'll be restricted to the bare minimum in living quarters and day-to-day consumables. It doesn't even give me an adequate budget for transportation between my observation tower and our residential compound."

"The committee discussed that. We think you should take another look at your plans. Do you really need a residential compound separate from your observation tower? Can't you include your living quarters in the tower?"

"I explained that in my proposal. I've put some space between the tower and the compound because I don't want to set up food producing plots that will disturb the area around the lake. Didn't anybody look at my proposal?"

"We looked at it very carefully, Davin. We have a lot of demands on our energy budget. If you feel you must have a separate residential compound, that's your decision. There are other areas in which you can economize. Your plan to use motorized transport between the compound and the tower is a good example. It's a moderate walk and our preliminary studies all indicate the local wildlife will leave you in peace. The chemical differences should give you all the protection you need."

Wangessi smiled. "Some members of the committee felt you should also consider a solo effort. Your—*wife*—won't be participating in your researches. If you only needed living space for one person, you could probably provide yourself with adequate quarters in a somewhat larger observation tower. I thought that was a little callous myself. If I had a permanent companion like Lizera, I would want her with me, too. But it *is* an alternative. She could retain her present job and make a *useful* contribution to the community."

Davin had been given a ritual that would override the calm his enhancements had started imposing on his system as soon as he saw Wangessi's smile. It was a deliberately complicated series of uncharacteristic hand gestures and subvocalized nonsense words. He had left Wangessi's office while he was still confident he could resist the temptation to activate it.

He terminated his call to G.G. and sent Wangessi a message with a Prime Emergency priority. Wangessi couldn't refuse a Prime Emergency call. A committee examined every call with that label.

Wangessi couldn't ignore the call, but he could take his time answering it. He used up almost ten minutes—about the maximum he could get away with. The packhunters were still communicating but they seemed to be conserving their energy. A head popped above the grass about once every minute. Lizera had told Davin she might as well sleep and he had nodded and let her put herself out.

"We've taken a close look at your situation," Wangessi said. "We've been running simulations. We've looked at the number you've already killed

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and the tactics they've been using. We've concluded we should stick to our initial judgment. The odds are well in your favor if you try to hold out until we can get the *Yellow Grass* to you."

"I'm not looking for *good odds*. This isn't a gambling game. I've told you what my wife's wounds are like."

"We've discussed your situation with the research teams that are currently studying packhunters. They all support our conclusion. We understand you'd like to get help as soon as possible. It's a natural response. But you haven't given us any evidence that indicates we should engage in a major diversion and redirect a shipment as important as the *North Wind*'s current cargo."

"And nothing you're saying has anything to do with your attitude toward my . . . *wife*."

Wangessi's voice changed. Davin could see him folding his hands and leaning across his desk as he bestowed his soberest gaze on his visitor. "This has nothing to do with that issue, Davin. No one has said a word about that matter."

"Then what did you talk about?"

"We have taken into account the overall goals of the community. We think our decision represents its values and priorities."

"We're talking about a human life! You don't jabber about odds when you're dealing with a human life! You send the best support available. As fast as you can."

"We believe we *are* implementing the consensus of the community. If you want us to reach a different conclusion, you'll have to supply us with more information. That's all I have to say, Davin. We aren't going to send you the *North Wind*. That's impossible. If you want us to send you the *Yellow Grass,* just say so. It's your choice."

"Your connection has been terminated," the Voice of the communications system said.

Davin eyed the position of the sun. He gave his auxiliary intelligence a series of commands and connected it with the primary system in the compound. A little flock of not-quite-birds rattled off calls as they skimmed across the grass. A khaki head sneaked a quick look on his left.

The system ran off four hundred simulations in two minutes. Conclusion: there was a 63 percent chance he and Lizera would survive a night attack and still be alive when the *Yellow Grass* reached them.

He had put the simulation together in a hurry. He had probably left out some important factors. Still, it probably approximated the results Wangessi and his colleagues had reached with their simulations.

He pulled another set of variables out of his head and let the new simulation run for three minutes. Conclusion: there was a 64 percent chance they could both reach the compound alive if they made a run for it in their current estimated physical condition.

Two out of three sounded like good odds when you were playing games or gambling money. It didn't look quite so wonderful when somebody might be killed if your foray turned into one of the failures.

Here's three glasses. One drink is poisoned. What's the best strategy?

Answer: don't drink.

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He sent G.G. a recording of his conversation with Wangessi. *I'm just asking you for an opinion. Can I assume the* Yellow Grass *will get here when they say it will? Without developing "mechanical problems" on the way?*

G.G. responded as soon as she received the message. "That's a hard one, Davin. Are you thinking you should try to make a run for your compound?"

"Yes."

"With Lizera?"

"Yes. With Lizera."

"I don't think you should just assume they'll deliberately delay the ship. I don't want to give you the idea you have to get out of this by yourself."

"But you think they could?"

"I think it's a possibility. It's what I've been trying to tell you. They wouldn't consider it murder if Lizera died. They'd just feel they had eliminated one more undesirable situation."

"She didn't ask to be the way she is. I didn't ask anyone to make her the way she is. She's a lot better off with me than she would have been back in that resort."

"You're being logical, Davin. People aren't logical. You and I—we're doing something millions of people would like to do. They can't just look the other way. While we live out their fantasies."

He looked down at Lizera. What kind of orders had she given herself? Would she wake up if he left her on the hill? Would she sleep until the moment teeth and claws started tearing at her?

He checked his physical status. The rest had pulled him away from the yellow zone.

He bent over and tugged on Lizera's coat until she jerked awake. Her head lolled to one side. Davin made himself smile.

"Time to get back to work, love."

Lizera stared at his face. Her brow wrinkled.

"They can't get a ship here in time," Davin said. "I've done some wargaming on the situation, and it looks like we've got a better position than I thought. We'll give you a moment to get your bearings. Then we'll have to plow through the little beasties one more time."

"You're going to go on carrying me?"

"Give me your second cassette. I want to start off with a full load."

She pulled the cassette out of her left cargo pocket and he picked up her gun and replaced the old cassette. His eyes darted between the grass and the gun while he worked with the prompts on the display screen. His ID number appeared on the screen. He ordered the gun to assume firing mode and a red light glowed on the top of the barrel. The gun was connected to his brain-machine link.

"You can carry my gun," he said. "As a spare. For me. You just have to hold on. I carried you this far—I can carry you the rest of the way."

He dropped to one knee. He guided her arm around his shoulder and she bent her good leg at the knee and helped him lift her upright.

The first attack group started wailing just as he reached the bottom of

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the little hill and started up the final rise. It was a quartet on his left. He had to watch them over the top of Lizera's head. Two of them were plowing straight toward him. The other two were following courses that would position them for an attack from the rear.

He fired three bursts at the two ripples that were taking the direct approach. The animal on the right ended its run in a storm of waving grass. Davin trained the gun on the other ripple and fired as the packhunter took to the air. He had to turn to shoot at it but he kept sidestepping to the right, gaining ground one boot-width at a time. The animal snapped at its side as if it were biting at an insect. It flew past his shoulder and he turned to his rear. The two animals that had circled behind them were approaching jumping distance.

A hard, solid mass slammed into his back. He stumbled forward, clutching at Lizera with his left hand, and a second blow shoved him into the ground. Lizera let go of his clothes and slipped away from him. A third bundle of fury landed on his shoulders. Claws scraped at his coat and hood.

His brain was already processing the new data. The packhunters had obviously changed their tactics. Some of them must have crept through the grass and attacked from ambush when he was watching the incoming ripples. Would they keep up the hit-and-run tactics? The two that had hit him from behind had apparently run off—as if they were supposed to buffet him as hard as they could and run away.

He threw himself on top of Lizera. The animal on his back stopped its clawings. It jumped into the bush and he pulled the gun close to his side and waited for the next assault. His auxiliary intelligence ticked off the seconds. At twelve, he jumped up and straddled Lizera.

The din was reaching another climax. Four more ripples were streaking toward him. He turned his head and saw another quartet coming in from the opposite direction.

He pointed the gun at the first group of ripples. He raised his chin and let out the biggest roar he could muster. "*I'm still here, you four-legged pests! I'm still upright. You're wearing yourselves out faster than you're exhausting me. You're losing lives every time you come in!*"

How would they interpret his voice? Would they hear the bellow of an animal that was still charged with energy? Or would his pitch or some other unpredictable factor make his outburst sound, to them, like a cry of exhaustion and defeat?

The set of ripples on his left veered away and ran across his front. The other set fanned out and kept coming. The gun cracked. Another animal died. He swung the barrel across the ripple that seemed to be coming straight at him and managed to stop it, too. The other two ripples swerved off course and raced past his front.

He settled his knee on the ground. Lizera put her arm around his neck and he hauled her up again. "I'm going to run for it," he said. "This is crazy. They're still doing hit-and-run tactics. They may not even realize we'll be out of reach when we get inside the hedge. I could be up there in half a minute—carrying you all the way—if they weren't trying to stop us."

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"You're just going to let them knock us down?"

"They got through your armor just that once. They may not even realize we're trying to reach the compound."

"Would you like me to let out some yells? Like you just did?"

Davin smiled. "Can your energy level support it?"

"I've got all the energy I need, Davin. You're the one who's operating without any sleep."

Davin charged up the hill as if he had just stepped outside after a solid night's rest. Four ripples streamed toward him on the right and he ignored them and kept running. Lizera's yells stabbed at his left eardrum. She sounded shrill to him, but what difference did it make? For all he knew, the packhunters could be hearing cries that indicated she had the strength of a dominant female at the peak of her lifespan.

He had covered a good seventy meters—he had climbed over a third of the slope—when the lead ripple in the quartet reached the packhunters' jumping range. He lowered his head and chugged on.

The animal slammed into his right shoulder. The angry rasping in his right ear blended with Lizera's scream. Davin let himself sink to his knees. The second animal hurled itself at his back. He staggered away from it, holding onto Lizera, and a third animal landed directly in front of him.

The third animal reared up on its hind legs. Claws struck at Davin's face. He lowered his head and took the blow on his hood. His gun fired. Two more blows buffeted the top of his head. A hole spread across the packhunter's stomach. Davin pulled himself to his feet and lunged forward.

The Voice of his auxiliary intelligence rang through his brain. "Warning. Warning. Do not ignore this message. You have entered the physiological danger zone. At your present rate of energy consumption, you could reach total collapse within five minutes."

The slope steepened. Lizera resumed her yelling. She was supporting some of her weight on her good leg but she was basically a sack he was dragging along. The load was forcing him to take short steps, but he was still pulling a slow jog out of his leg muscles.

His eye picked up the first sign of four ripples streaming toward him on his left front. He turned his head and saw four more ripples following them.

Lizera stopped yelling. "They're advancing in echelon!"

Davin had never studied military history, but he understood the term. The rear quartet was positioned just to the right of the lead group, so the two units were arranged in a stepwise formation.

Was it deliberate? Was there any tactical advantage to the arrangement? Or had it just happened by accident?

He stayed on course, moving straight up the hill, concentrating on gaining ground. He stopped just as the first ripple reached jumping distance. He pushed Lizera's arm away from his neck. "Lie down. On your face."

She slid down his side. The first packhunter cleared the grass and he stepped over her and fired. A solid body slammed into his right shoulder before he could turn on the next one. He leaned away from the blow and

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two living missiles toppled him with collisions that hit him almost simultaneously.

The second quartet broke through the grass on the run while he was still forcing himself to his knees. He threw himself across Lizera and made the gun fire blindly, without the aid of the sighting glasses. Claws and teeth dug at his armor. A paw rocked his head back and forth. There was a long—infinitely long—period when he wondered if they had stopped their hit-and-run tactics. Then they were gone. And he was once again pulling Lizera upright.

"Warning. Warning. Do not ignore this message. You have entered the physiological danger zone. At your present rate of energy consumption, you could reach total collapse within three minutes."

The hedge wasn't that far. Twenty meters. Call it forty steps. One. Two. Three. . . .

He heard the wailing on his right when he reached twelve. He counted off five more steps and stopped his advance. He fired methodically at each ripple, double burst after double burst, using up his ammunition so he wouldn't have to burn up energy enduring another series of blows. The fourth animal veered away when its companions stopped communicating and he dropped the gun and started running.

"Warning. Warning. Do not ignore this message. You have entered the physiological danger zone. At your present rate of energy consumption, you could reach total collapse within two minutes."

He transmitted a command to the compound and the security system shut down the hedge as he took his last step. "Lean your gun against the hedge. I'm going to give you a boost."

He grabbed her by the waist and lifted her up. The top was four meters above their heads. He had studied videos of the packhunters and made sure the hedge would stymie their best jumpers.

Lizera plunged her arms into the hedge and grabbed the thicker branches on the inside. "I've got a grip, Davin. You can let go."

"Ease yourself off the other side. Just remember—you can damage your legs all you want. It's your head we can't replace."

He picked up the gun and turned around. Ripples were coming up the hill from every direction. The display on the gun presented him with a magnificent three seconds.

"It's tricky when you can't use one of your legs," Lizera said.

They were fifty meters left of the gate. He had decided they would be better off if they went straight for the hedge. Now he wondered if he'd made the right move.

He trained his sighting glasses on the nearest ripples. The gun cracked four times. He had approximately twenty-five usable rounds left.

"I'm pulling myself over the top."

The gun fired three more times. Davin looked up and saw Lizera's left foot projecting over the top of the hedge.

He fired every shot he had as fast as he could think the command. The red light lit up. He dropped the gun and jumped for the top of the hedge.

A wailing cyclone landed on his back. His hands plunged into the hedge and grabbed the thickest branches they could clutch.

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"Warning. Warning. Do not ignore this message. You have entered the physiological danger zone. At your present rate of energy consumption, you could reach total collapse within one minute."

The top of the hedge was two good handholds away. The packhunter on his back was clinging to his shoulders with its forepaws. The hedge was shaking as if it was being buffeted by some kind of machine. Packhunters had jumped out of the grass on his right and left and started clawing their way up the branches.

He switched on his communications implant and connected with Lizera. "Are you over? Are you down?"

"I'm going over now. . . . I'm down."

"Roll away from the hedge. I'm turning it on."

The packhunter on his back let out a single long rasp and fell away. The animals that were climbing the hedge dropped off. Davin couldn't feel the pain himself but he knew his body was using up energy reacting to it.

He pulled himself up to the top of the hedge. He stretched out on it sidewise and pushed himself into a roll.

"Warning. Warning. Do not ignore this message. You have crossed into the red zone. I repeat, you have crossed into the red zone. Your systems are now being shut down. There is no guarantee you will recover."

You could have died, Lizera said to him. I looked at your energy readings. You could have died. You're my wife, Davin said. And saw the look on her face.

She had dragged him away from the hedge. She had set the electrical system on lethal. She had crawled to their living quarters and returned with the nutrients and injectors the medicine cabinet had advised her to use. She had covered him with blankets and watched over him while he lay on the ground through six hours of darkness. She hadn't done anything for herself until he had stumbled back to their bedroom and drifted into hours of normal sleep.

She hadn't voiced any complaints, of course, when he had connected the screens in the compound with the screens in the tower and spent long periods observing the lakenesters. It hadn't been the best way to make observations, but the events that had followed had made him glad he had done it. She had even been pleasantly amused when he had shown her his posting on their adventure. *Some Observations on the Hunting Behavior of the Packhunters of Itoko from the Viewpoint of a Prey Animal,* she had read aloud. And offered him a warm, slightly mischievous smile.

But the memory that gnawed at him was the response she gave him when he told her he was adding the packhunters to his observation program. The packhunter researchers had all asked him to do it. The packhunters in his territory had been hammered by a powerful stressor, they had argued. He could observe their reactions under an unusual set of variables.

"They're insisting we should have a vehicle," Davin told Lizera. "Even Wangessi's people will have to give in."

"But it's extra work for you. You'll have to spend less time with your own animal."

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Davin shrugged. "It will be worth it. We'll be able to go back and forth to the tower together. The work I'll be doing with the packhunters will probably just be supplementary research, but it will be worth it. I won't have to leave you here when I'm in the tower."

And heard her say, It's up to you . . . if it's what you want. And saw, for the second time, the look that told him she was standing on one side of a chasm and he was standing on the other.

"I never really understood," Davin told G.G. Ying. "I thought I understood. But I didn't. Everything I did out there—it doesn't mean a thing to her. It doesn't mean a thing that I put my life at risk when I could have left her behind—that I need her so much I'm willing to take on the extra work just so she'll be safe and I can have her with me in the tower. She can't understand why anyone would think her welfare was just as important as his. She doesn't have any need to be loved. She doesn't even have a need to be *needed*. Everything I feel about her—to her it's just incomprehensible."

"Well, of course," G.G. said. "What did you expect?" ○

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TEA WITH THE QUEEN

I scalded an ant today
with a spoonful of hot tea.
The ant, brazen on countertop,
uninvited, heedless of proper place.
Enough! I decreed,
Death to ants in my kitchen!
Gather your crumbs elsewhere.

The ant spasmed, shriveled,
surprised by so much tannin and heat.
Perhaps ant systems flashed, green to red,
or internal klaxons blared, too late.
No matter.
This hive-minded alien,
this common robot
now useless junk,
I tossed with the tea leaves
that told its fortune.

Now sitting on my porch
sipping from steaming mug,
I contemplate my next move.
One ant, after all, is but a pawn,
hardly worthy.
To meet my real adversary
I must delve deeper.

I lay out the silver service,
the bone china and best linen.
I put the kettle on to boil,
ready for tea with the Queen.

—Robert L. Nansel

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On Books

Paul Di Filippo

True Forms

Let's trust the instincts and passions of our artists and follow them where their muses lead, even if their paths take them —gasp!—outside the SF field.

Rudy Rucker's latest novel, *As Above, So Below* (Forge, hardcover, $23.95, 304 pages, ISBN 0-765-30403-1), is a historical tale focusing on the life of Peter Bruegel the Elder, specifically the years 1552 to 1569, during which all-too-brief period Bruegel went from youthful apprentice to accomplished master, before his untimely death at age forty-four. (This, of course, is not the first time Rucker has ventured capably into the past: recall *The Hollow Earth* [1990], which featured Poe as protagonist.) Organized into sixteen chapters, each of which is thematically linked to one of Bruegel's famous paintings, this novel jumps picaresquely from highpoint to highpoint in the artist's life. Yet various themes and characters, incidents and motifs reappear across all the chapters, expertly woven into a vivid tapestry. By the book's end, we do not feel that we have seen only random glimpses of a biography, but rather a rich, organically complete lifetime. In this sense, Rucker slyly mimics Bruegel's own technique, which consisted of many small vignettes assembled into a whole panoramic canvas.

The amount of research that helped form this book is palpably tremendous. The geopolitics and quotidian details of the sixteenth century are lavishly laid out, and the philosophical and scientific paradigms of the era are internalized into the outlooks of the characters. (Consider the fascinating section on how paints were made laboriously from scratch.) But eternal matters are depicted as well: the struggle of a young artist to break from academic traditions (Bruegel wants to capture the "true forms" of objects, not just their clichéd representations); the search for a soul mate (much of the book revolves around Bruegel's quest for the hand of young Mayken Coecke); the tension between art and commerce (which can even turn deadly when the Inquisition is involved). Rucker manages the delicate trick of making his tale both exotically foreign in time and space and yet resonant with the present day.

Much of Rucker's success stems from his obvious identification with his subject. Given a relative paucity of solid historical data about Bruegel, Rucker is able to reverse-engineer the man from his paintings, and the result is a visionary artist who embodies Rucker's own dichotomous concern with the matters both of dirty earth and of numinous heaven. When Bruegel, close to death, exclaims that he can see his whole life as if from above it, we of course chuckle, recognizing Rucker's own fourth-dimensional perspective.

As for more gonzo aspects of

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Rucker's fiction, rest assured that they are not missing. While playing the tale mostly straight, our author inserts plenty of typically Rucker-ish moments: two comely wenches named "Betje and Veronika;" a happy-go-lucky dog named Waf; a crude pal of Bruegel's named Martin deVos. But the wildest element in this tale is the halfbreed fellow named Williblad Cheroo. Whenever this devilish character is on stage, the book shoots into the same territory occupied by John Barth's great novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), and that puts it in high company indeed.

Look Homeward, Angelmaker

"Leander Watts" is the pen-name of an accomplished writer firmly ensconced in the avant-garde wing of SF. Not wishing readers of his first Young Adult novel to experience cognitive dissonance should they chance to stumble upon his more outré works, Watts has chosen to remain concealed behind his pseudonym. This is the intriguing but ultimately inconsequential background to the appearance of *Stonecutter* (Houghton Mifflin, hardcover, $15.00, 181 pages, ISBN 0-618-16474-X). The book itself possesses immense merits that render such literary gossip well beside the point.

In the year 1835, in the wilds of upstate New York, young Albion Straight serves as a journeyman stonecutter to his amiable master, Mr. Bonness. Bonness's son, Watty, a child with preternatural senses, is as close as a brother to Albion. When a strange man hires Albion away on a three-month contract, it's natural that both Albion and Watty should feel distressed. But their mutual sadness is as naught to what Albion shall experience as he finds what his new master, one John Good, has in store for him.

Good is a rich man building a mansion in the wilderness. But he is also partly a madman. Rendered obsessive by grief over his dead wife, Good intends for Albion to sculpt a vast memorial to the vanished woman, using Michal, Good's adolescent daughter, as a model for the deceased. Trapped on Good's isolated estate, Albion and Michal plot their escape from Good's tyranny. But their path to freedom is strewn with barriers, and only immense perseverance and luck can possibly bring them to their goal.

Told in the first person, in the form of Albion's unaffected journal entries, this book offers an uncompromisingly stern worldview, reminiscent of Hawthorne and Henry James, of Poe and Melville. Replete with proto-Gothic imagery, *Stonecutter* brings vividly to life a shadowy era in American history when the encircling forests concealed not ATV trails and Sierra Club outposts, but rather panthers and savages, hardscrabble farms and haunted hollows. Yet so bold and good-hearted is Albion that he casts a soulful radiance that dispels the shadows of his primitive, limited life.

Watts deals with some of the same issues connected with the artist's life that Rucker does in his book discussed above, and just as complexly. The impossible task that Good sets for the young lad recalls the similar assignment given to the protagonist of Jeffrey Ford's *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* (2002). And some of the same nineteenth-century eeriness of Alex Irvine's *A*

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Scattering of Jades (2002) is also to be found here. All in all, this novel transcends any category so limiting as "Young Adult." Brought to the screen by someone like Tim Burton (think of his *Sleepy Hollow* [1999]), this novel would be hailed as a period thriller for all ages—which is exactly how you should regard it in book form.

Down and Out in Super Europe

The phenomenal Brian Aldiss has recently released two novels almost simultaneously. Wonderful news, for all us dyed-in-the-wool Aldissians. But the bad news is that neither—shamefully—has a US publisher. Yet all is not lost. Simply surf on over to *www.amazon.co.uk* if you wish to purchase and revel in these two fine books.

The Cretan Teat (House of Stratus, hardcover, £9.99, 206 pages, ISBN 0-7551-1147-8) is a small-scale comic gem, with surreal and metafictional flavors. Our guide to its wonders is an unnamed elderly British novelist of some repute, narrating in the first person, whose career is doddering along at acceptable if not thrilling levels—until he is betrayed by his own randiness into a ludicrous scandal. Embedded in this frametale are actual portions of the novel the besieged author is currently composing, called *The Cretan Teat*. This book within a book concerns Archie Langstreet, a UN official, his wife Kathi and their son Clifford. The trio are on holiday in Greece when they stumble upon an icon illustrating an apocryphal incident from the infancy of Jesus. Soon the icon becomes world-famous, with bizarre effects on global society. Toss in some terrorism and marital discord, and you have a plot that would easily flesh out a complete standalone book.

However, it's where the two narratives intersect that Aldiss achieves his most fruitful results. As our hapless novelist lurches from one comic misfortune to another, Kathi Langstreet begins to appear in his world, and he learns just how much he does not know about her life and his own.

With echoes of Lawrence Durrell and Kingsley Amis, this book proves that Brian Aldiss is still playing at the top of his game. But to echo the Vonnegut-style tagphrase that occurs throughout the book, "What else did you expect?"

Aldiss's second book, *Super-State* (Orbit, hardcover, £16.99, 230 pages, ISBN 1-84149-144-6), is allied in its sardonic and rapier-like tone with *Cretan Teat*. This book is overall not quite so farcical, though, and deals with matters of more gravity and import than its mate, the same matters in fact treated more weightily in J.G. Ballard's recent *Super-Cannes* (2000). The setting here is an ultra-unified, prosperous Europe of some forty years hence, one of the three dominant powers of its era (the USA and China being the other two, with no mention made of poor old Russia, Japan, or any other region). But Aldiss wisely chooses to depict his community at a moment of crisis, not calm. The EU wants to go to war with a small Asian state for problematical causes; the impact of a meteor has launched a massive tidal wave across the Atlantic toward Britain, France, and Spain; and various dissenters and terrorists are busy seeking to undermine the super-state. In other words,

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Aldiss's wickedly pointed scenario could not come much closer to today's current affairs, *mutatis mutandis*, if he had cut and pasted headlines from yesterday into his book.

Into this tasty pudding of power struggles and social climbing and intellectual ferment are seeded literally scores of intriguing characters, making for a panoramic novel that hops about like a six-legged jackrabbit. (Although it lacks the multi-media stylings of John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* [1968], this book can otherwise stand as something of an heir to Brunner's plugged-in extrapolations.) We meet everyone from prime ministers to impoverished painters; cops on the beat to New Age gurus; media personalities to courageous astronauts. (A subplot involves the first human expedition to Jupiter's moon, Europa.) And there are even non-human characters, in the form of a race of servant androids, prone to conduct rather Phildickian conversations among themselves when humans aren't listening.

Writing like a combination of H.G. Wells and Anthony Burgess, Aldiss barrels along, generously heaping incident after hilarious or shocking incident upon us. (The ridiculous mutual murder of two inept assassins, for instance, is counterbalanced by such events as the death of a terrorist and his Stockholm-syndrome victim.) Aldiss possesses the true tragicomic vision of humanity and its fate in the universe. Someone should elect him president of this sorry old globe before we blow ourselves up. Except that, based on his opinion of politicians ("Politicians . . . are able to order their lives so that every waking hour is busy, so that self-enquiry or self-doubt need never intrude."), he'd be wise enough to decline the job.

Travels with Archie

Nicholas Christopher is one of those "mainstream fantasists" along the lines of Mark Helprin and Paul LaFarge—reviewed in the New York *Times*, his picture in *Vanity Fair*—whose work is far from condescending to the genre, and whose novels would amply resonate with fandom—if anyone at Christopher's press solicited such attention. But we can erect bridges from our end of the great divide, as well.

Christopher's first novel, *The Soloist* (1986), was determinedly mimetic. But starting with his second, *Veronica* (1996), he leaped into the empyrean of magical realism. A professional poet prior to his novelizing, Christopher produces elegant prose matched only by his deft use of archetypical mysteries and enigmas, arrayed in dazzling patterns reminiscent of a Crowley or Gene Wolfe. *A Trip to the Stars* (2000) was even more ambitious and amazing than its predecessor.

Now comes *Franklin Flyer* (Dial Press, hardcover, $24.95, 317 pages, ISBN 0-385-33545-8), and while not quite as complexified as *Trip*, it's absorbingly wonderful. Our hero is named in the title: he derives his odd cognomen from the name of the ill-fated train he was riding when his mother gave birth to him, in the midst of wreckage. His miraculous appearance in the world is merely the first in a long history of odd incidents and adventures that we will follow, from the years 1929 to 1942. With an enchanting period feel, the globe-trot-

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ting Franklin Flyer will encounter dozens of famous personages—FDR, "Wild Bill" Donovan, Rita Hayworth, Josephine Baker—as well as a cast of equally riveting invented characters, such as the pulp publisher Otto Zuhl and the evil assassin Tommy Choylo. An inventor by bent, Franklin makes his fortune, gets swept up in the storm of WWII, and helps destroy the Axis's plans to use the mystery metal zilium to conquer the world.

But greater than these affairs of the world are Franklin's affairs of the heart. A succession of occult women crop up at different points in his life, all with different lessons about the nature of reality to teach him. Led on by one paramount image—the chance-encountered photo of a woman he has never met—Franklin finds in the arms of these demi-goddesses the secrets hidden in his own heart.

And let us not forget the role played by Franklin's most constant companion, a most unusual cat named Archie. Shipwrecked together early in Franklin's career, Archie and his owner establish a bond nearly as tight as those with the man's various paramours.

Christopher's shapely prose is clear as water, nothing convoluted nor arch about it, yet it manages to produce immense effects. Combined with a ceaselessly onflowing narrative voice, his text generates belief and faith in its teller. When, toward the novel's end, we receive a lesson on love— "Across the centuries, through millions of lifetimes, love is passed along by human beings without the machinery of the state, without laws or religions."—we nod gently and say, "Yes, you've showed me this, not just preached it, and I heartily concur."

American Fables

I know it's wrong. I know one should allow favorite authors to grow and develop, not demand that they remain stuck repeating themselves, offering the same tricks and stunts you just so happen to enjoy. Still and all, I can't help once in a while missing the younger James Blaylock, he who was more concerned with pratfalls and silliness than with mature confrontations with life and death. The Blaylock of *The Digging Leviathan* (1984) versus the Blaylock of *Winter Tides* (1997). But ultimately I don't really want James Blaylock to revert to his green youth and lose all the wonderful skills and insights he's since developed and exhibited in his more recent fiction. So I cast about for a substitute author, someone who can pull off the same jovial effects. As you might imagine, the search is quite challenging. But of late, I think I've found such a writer, who moreover possesses his own distinctive style and themes.

That man is Van Reid.

Reid debuted in 1998 with *Cordelia Underwood*. Set in Maine in the 1890s, this book tells of the founding of the Moosepath League, a social club of zanies, organized around the redoubtable Mister Tobias Walton, who find themselves embroiled in both serious adventures and absurd contretemps. *Mollie Peer* swiftly followed in 1999, and added a layer of tragedy in its tale of a nameless, kidnapped orphan boy whom the Moosepathians rescue. *Daniel Plainway* (2000) concluded the story arc, as the dark secrets of the orphan, since christened "Bird," are brought to light. And while the third book left the future open for more tales of the

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Moosepath League, it definitely seemed to round off or cap Reid's amazing narrative sprint.

In these books—which have minor supernatural elements—Reid evokes such wonderful antique humorists as Jerome K. Jerome and Stephen Leacock, as well as the master of them all, the Dickens of *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). In prose that is old-fashioned in construction and vocabulary, yet utterly readable and droll without being postmodernly ironic, Reid chronicles the quirky misunderstandings of his protagonists, their love lives and hopes and fears, producing vast emotional payoffs. He generates laughter and a knot in the throat equally well.

Reid's new book, *Peter Loon* (Viking, hardcover, $24.95, 299 pages, ISBN 0-670-03052-X), is both a continuation in spirit of his earlier ones and a departure from them in style and tone. Reaching back one hundred years earlier into the history of his beloved state of Maine (the tangibility of Reid's recreation of this era, as well as that of the 1890's Down East, is part of the charm of his books), Reid focuses on a hardscrabble farm inhabited by the Loon family. Seventeen-year-old Peter, as oldest boy, assumes a dire burden when his father dies. His mother, a distracted, half-mad sort, rouses him one midnight and bids him leave immediately to find his "Uncle Obed Winslow"—in actuality an old boyfriend of hers. Unsophisticated Peter dutifully sets out, little imagining what the wide world holds for him.

Resting himself in a pile of leaves on his first scary night on the road, Peter is awakened most unconventionally: nearby hunters have shot a huge deer that collapses atop Peter. Getting up from under the beast, Peter seems supernaturally reborn from the bloody carcass. Only the arrival of another wanderer, Parson Leach, convinces the hunters that Peter is not a supernatural creature.

From here, Peter's fate is bound up with Leach's. Rebellion is in the air, as poor settlers and rich landholders struggle for the deeds to Maine's riches. Casting about for his "Uncle," Peter finds himself meeting a colorful parade of people, including the Clayden family—a wealthy household whose generous members undermine his sense of loyalty to the underdog class he was born into. As matters mount to a head, Peter finds that his black-and-white version of the world is not large or subtle enough, and must be revised. And as for Uncle Obed? His climactic appearance remains the biggest shock to Peter.

Reid has done away with his amusing circumlocutions and leisurely pacing in this book, instead fashioning a language that evokes the solemn, spirit-haunted landscape of early America and a story that barrels along at a speedy clip. Less Blaylockian than his earlier books, his wackiest characterizations and incidents are toned down, although such a scene as the meeting between shy Peter and the bluff Clayden patriarch in the latter's library still provokes chuckles. With elements of Gothic mystery, *Peter Loon* is a shadowy tale even without overt supernaturalism. When Parson Leach and Peter meet the faunlike mountain man Mr. Klaggerfell and his dog Pownal in a nighted clearing, the effect is akin to any similar meeting conjured up by Gene Wolfe in his *Book of the Short Sun*. Peter's whole pilgrimage hews to an archetypical fabulist outline.

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This is the pure-quill American version of *Puss in Boots* or *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Not to read this simply because it's not marketed as SF or fantasy is to deprive yourself of a major pleasure.

Small Press Titles

Every now and then an experimentally post-cyberpunk book arrives with such a strange and deliberate voice that the lucky reader is convinced that nothing ever after in the genre will be the same. Of course, the sleepy and imperturbable genre usually keeps rolling right along, heedless of the visionary in its midst. Nonetheless, these hermetic mutants repay your attention, and somehow their impact does filter, however tenuously, into the mainstream of SF. Perhaps the first such book was Darick Chamberlin's *Cigarette Boy* (1991). Recently, we had Andres Vaccari's *Robotomy* (1997). And today we are privileged to discover Simon Logan's *I-O* (Prime, trade paper, $12.00, 110 pages, ISBN 1-894815-05-X). Logan bills the eight stories in this volume "industrial fiction," and they earn this designation by virtue of their cyborg characters moving across polluted factory landscapes immeasurable to man. Like a combination of David Bunch and J.G. Ballard, Logan tells tales of a wounded humanity that has lived so long with its mechanical adjuncts that "nature" is a meaningless term. The twisted love story of "Ignition"—where a man who is a living bomb becomes enamored of a female terrorist who uses his explosive power over and over for her own selfish goals—is by itself worth the price of this innovative book.

The poetry of G.O. Clark, a regular *Asimov's* contributor, is collected at last in book form in *A Box Full of Alien Skies* (Dark Regions Press, chapbook, $5.95, 42 pages, ISBN 0-888993-25-1). Here you'll find Clark's pleasingly conversational, yet hauntingly touching reflections on such themes as the vastness of space contrasted with the shortness of a human life ("The Unfinished Map of the Sky") and the ways in which the very medium of SF has changed over the generations ("Where Are You Now My Bug Eyed Ones"). My favorite poem, "When Robots Dance," conjures up the unforgettable image of a generation starship where the only sign of a mission gone awry is the pirouetting automatons of the title.

More fantastical stanzas can be found in the latest colorful issue of *Mythic Delirium* (DNA Publications, chapbook, $5.00, 30 pages, ISSN 1529-3726). Several well-known poets—Schweitzer, Kopaska-Merkel, Ann Schwader—consort with newer names—Sonya Taafe, Danny Adams, Shunit Mor-Barak—to produce verses that range across the map of horror, SF, and fantasy. Fabulous beasts tend to predominate in this issue—dragons (Karen Porter's "Ophion") and lunar steeds (Gary Every's "Moon Horses") among them. Include the snakes that sprout from a certain head in Kopaska-Merkel's "Medusa's Tale," and you've got a zoo of wonders indeed.

Winging at us from Down Under like a flock of Seussian Star-Bellied Sneetches comes *AustrAlien Absurdities* (Agog! Press, trade paper, AUS$19.95, 226 pages, ISBN 0-958056-71-4). This anthology of comic prose, ably edited by Chuck McKenzie and Tansy Rayner

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Roberts, provides enough laughter to fuel a starship from here to the nearest quasar. Most of the names in this volume will be unfamiliar to U.S. readers, but generous introductions establish the credentials of all involved, pointing toward other books to hunt down. The beneficent spirits of Robert Sheckley, William Tenn, Douglas Adams, and Ron Goulart attend most of these stories, which have a propensity to focus, however individually, on the same subset of comical SF tropes: funny aliens, funny robots, funny barbarians. For the most part, this book's a lark, although a certain repetition of effect does begin to set in. That's why a story like Cathy Cupitt's "Position Vacant: Cobweb Quality Control Tester" stands out, with its Kafkaesque and Sladek-like vocational craziness. It's the one story where the writer's own personal frustrations really come into play.

A second collection from Australia offers an intriguing counterpoint to *AustrAlien Absurdities*. Edited by Bill Congreve, *Passing Strange* (MirrorDanse Books, trade paper AUS$19.95, 169 pages, ISBN 0-9586-5833-1), spans the spectrum of speculative fiction, from Cat Sparks's music-inspired cyberpunkish "100% M-Hype™" to the supremely silly fantasy "The Were-Sofa" by Naomi Hatchman. Never less than competent and readable, many of these stories approach must-read status. But surely the finest in the volume is Kate Orman's "All the Children of Chimaera." This tale—of a Renaissance England where all the imaginary abominable creatures described by far-travelers truly exist—summons comparisons to Ted Chiang's "Seventy-two Letters." In a fairer world, this one would be on the award-ballots next year.

Fresh from the success of his fast-paced novella *Diamond Dogs* (2001), the space-operatic Alastair Reynolds offers another similarly sized work, *Turquoise Days* (Golden Gryphon, trade paper, $15.95, 78 pages, ISBN unavailable). Set in his ongoing "Revelation Space" universe, this book (which has a sly hook back to *Diamond Dogs*) concerns a woman named Naqi Okpik, resident of the waterworld Turquoise, where gloppy maritime aliens known as Pattern Jugglers occupy the center of Naqi's professional and private life. After her sister is swallowed up into the communal aliens, Naqi discovers that her troubles are just beginning. This book showcases Reynolds' flair for exotic locales, startling concepts, and crisp language. And as Golden Gryphon's first venture into limited editions, this book offers future monetary returns as well as literary ones.

The wide range and high quality of the fourteen stories in *Redsine Eight* (Prime, trade paper, $6.00, 135 pages, ISBN 1-894815-01-7) is truly astonishing. (The latest issue of this paperback anthology also contains a typically perceptive interview by Nick Gevers with Tim Powers.) From the Euronoir "Elektra Dreams" by Geoffrey Maloney to the cyberpunkish "Les Autres" by Adam Browne to the off-the-wall deconstruction of the Robin Hood Myth, "Robin Hood's New Mother," by Rhys Hughes, editors Trent Jamieson and Garry Nurrish have assembled a winning pack of slipstreamy stories that share nothing in common except their authors' intentions to push the fantasy envelope. Like the Bradbury-

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ish demiurge in Jack Fisher's "Mr October," these stories enchant and hypnotize.

Picture this: it is long after midnight, and you sit in a room lit by flickering gas flames. A man is reading aloud a horror story to you, his rapt audience, a story titled "The Rats in the Walls." And that man is the story's author, H.P. Lovecraft, who even "laughs the insane laugh of the cannibalistic character." Such was the actual experience, oft-repeated with different tales, of Muriel and C.M. Eddy, HPL's closest friends in Providence. You can read the memoirs written by the Eddys about their friend in *The Gentleman from Angell Street* (Fenham Publishing, trade paper, $9.95, 65 pages, ISBN 0-9701699-1-4), which also contains some of Muriel's poetry. This book offers a useful first-hand perspective on a writer who sometimes seems larger than life, but who to the Eddys was simply a beloved, unique companion and fellow toiler in the *Weird Tales* vineyard.

Such wistful words as luminous and enchanting do not fully capture the sinewy strengths of Charles Harness's *Cybele, with Bluebonnets* (NESFA Press, hardcover, $21.00, 160 pages, ISBN 1-886778-41-8). A combination of Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* (1957) and Robert Nathan's *Portrait of Jennie* (1947), this quasi-autobiographical novel by the author of such SF classics as *Flight into Yesterday* (1953) and *The Ring of Ritornel* (1968) possesses a fey charm all its own. This story—of the maturation of Joe Barnes, a talented but poor young man growing up in Depression-era Texas, and his doomed yet exalted romance with the Rima-like woman named Cybele Wilson—is filled with Texas lore, eerie events, the allure of chemistry, tall tales, drama, humor, and pathos. Gene Wolfe's cover recommendation is an apt connection to Wolfe's own brand of magical realism, and Harness proves that he's as capable in mimetic modes as he is in science fiction.

Alan Clark's harrowing memoir of his own real life surgical experiences forms the underpinnings of the macabre fiction in *Pain and Other Petty Plots to Keep You in Stitches* (IFD Publishing, trade paper, $16.00, 112 pages, ISBN 0-9671912-5-4). Along with co-writers Randy Fox, Mark Edwards, Troy Guinn, and Jeremy Robert Johnson, Clark—who has contributed thirty B&W reproductions of his enigmatic and brooding and bloody paintings that informed the creation of this fiction—plumbs the depths of what bodies can endure—yet with an eye peeled more toward the Kafkaesque black humor angle than otherwise. In the long novella "Pain and Other Petty Plots," we witness the Grand Guignol goings-on at a hospital where Burroughs's Doctor Benway would feel right at home. By facing unflinchingly the limitations and trancensions of our mortal shells, Clark and company derive courage and bravado from suffering.

Ramsey Campbell's new novel *The Darkest Part of the Woods* (PS Publishing, limited hardcover, $55.00, 349 pages, ISBN 1-902880-38-2) is Lovecraftian in the best sense. It replicates in Campbell's own distinctive voice the best frissons of HPL's work, specifically *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927; 1951), without slavishly echoing any of the Master's eccentricities. This tale of Heather Price and her family—sister Sylvie, son Sam,

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mother Margo, and father Lennox —and the cursed plot of turf known as Goodmanswood is guaranteed to produce chills. Campbell's sophisticated sense of terror, the way in which he so-very-gradually builds suspense, is perfectly embodied in his sly, well-wrought prose. The village life of the Prices assumes so much mimetic heft that the supernatural goings-on are lent deep credibility as well. Perhaps only Campbell could make you shiver at the delivery of a simple Christmas tree—and that's just one scene out of many equally disturbing yet plausible ones in this fine book.

Publisher Ben Jeapes and editor David Langford have done an incredible service to the genre by collecting and printing *Maps: The Uncollected John Sladek* (Big Engine, trade paper, £9.99, 359 pages, ISBN 1-903468-08-6). Sladek, lamentably deceased too young, was a comic genius too little cherished on this side of the Big Pond. This volume presents a brilliant overview of Sladek's talents. Divided into five sections— "Stories, Mostly"; "Poems and Playlets"; "Sladek Incognito"; "Sladek and Disch"; and "Sladek on Sladek"—the items here range from formalistic experiments from the days of the New Wave to utterly conventional yet zingy murder mysteries in a Hitchcock manner. Consider this snatch of dialogue, then try to tell me Sladek wasn't SF's equivalent of the Marx Brothers: "He came to a pair of feet sticking out from under a blanket. 'Miss Carvell?' / " 'Don't look, sir,' said a doctor. 'Not a pretty sight.' / " 'Dead?' / " 'No, fainted. [The murderer] never touched her at all. Still, she's not a pretty sight.' "

Rich with local color, history and suspense, Brian Hopkins's *El Dia de los Muertos* (Earthling Publications, limited hardcover, $30.00, 109 pages, ISBN 0-9721518-0-X) is the story of a man, archaeologist Richard Bennington, driven beyond the bounds of sanity by the death of his daughter and the crippling of his wife in a Mexican earthquake. Convinced that invoking the old Aztec gods and asking favors of them will restore his happiness, Bennington embarks on a mad ritual whose outcome deviates wildly from his expectations. Hopkins, a three-time winner of the Stoker award, layers in emotional resonance through the use of extensive flashbacks and carries out a sustained supernatural conclusion across many more pages than a lesser writer would have attempted. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Memorial Day is the year's busiest convention weekend, with many big ones. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MAY 2003

2–4—**DemiCon.** For info, write: **Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322.** Or phone: **(515) 830-1305** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.demicon.org. (E-mail) info@demicon.org.** Con will be held in: Des Moines IA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hotel Fort Des Moines. Guests will include: Octavia E. Butler, Lubov, Lynda Sherman, Rusty Hevelin.

2–4—**PenguiCon. www.penguicon.sourceforge.net.** Van Dyke Park Suites Hotel, Warren MI. T. Pratchett, E. Raymond.

2–4—**Malice Domestic. www.malicedomestic.org.** Marriott, Crystal City (Arlington) VA. Mystery fiction. 175+ authors.

2–4—**StarFury. members.aol.com/fabevent/menu6. seanharry@aol.com.** Norbeck Castle, London UK. A. Acker. Media.

2–4—**FedCon. (+49 821) 219-1936. www.fedcon.de.** Maritim Hotel, Bonn, Germany. Trineer, Marsters, Scott. Star Trek.

9–11—**BakuretsuCon. www.bakuretsucon.org/. info@bakuretsucon.org.** Best Western, Burlington VT. Anime.

9–11—**Highlander Down Under. www.hidu.org.** Grand Chancellor, Spring Hill, Brisbane, Australia. Peter Wingfield.

16–18—**RocKon, Box 13118, Maumelle AR 72113. www.rockon.org.** Little Rock AR. S.R. Donaldson, S. Rosen.

16–18—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890.** Embassy Suites No., Phoenix AZ. Elmore, Madame M.

16–18—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6. www.keycon2003.tripod.com.** Radisson Downtown. Sawyer, Clink.

16–18—**Anime Central, 1400 W. Devon #410, Chicago IL 60660. www.acen.org.** Hyatt, Rosemont IL. Honda, Akahora.

16–18—**Anime North, PO Box 24090, 900 Dufferin, Toronto ON M6H 4H6. www.animenorth.com.** Regal Constellation.

17–18—**London Expo, 341 Lea Bridge Rd., London E10 7LA, UK. (020) 8523-1074.** Excel. Gil Gerard, Herd. Media.

22–25—**SticCon, Box 68, San Michele al Tagliamento VE 30028, Italy. www.stic.it.** Nichelle Nichols. Star Trek.

23–24—**Silver Arrow, 4 Stitchman House, Byfield Rd., Northampton NN5 5HG, UK.** Plaza, Bristol UK. Robin Hood.

23–25—**MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. www.marcon.org.** Hyatt. J. G. Keyes, Ruth Thompson, the Suttons.

23–25—**Oasis, Box 940992, Maitland FL 32794. (407) 263-5822.** Radisson Plaza, Orlando FL. Sawyer, Bova, McDevitt.

23–25—**ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64171. kcsciencefiction.org.** Airport Hilton. E. Moon, Ellen Datlow.

23–25—**ConDuit, Box 11745, Salt Lake City UT 84147. (801) 294-9297.** Wyndham. Harry Turtledove, L. E. Modesitt.

23–25—**Animazement, Box 1383, Cary NC 27512. www.animazement.com.** Sheraton Imperial Hotel, Durham NC. Anime.

23–25—**Crashdown, Box 409, Sittingbourne ME10 1WU, UK. (017) 9542-8440.** Thistle, London. D. Nutter. Media.

23–26—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 536-2737.** Wyndham. Lee & Miller, the Rayyans, S. MacDonald.

23–26—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-8850.** Concourse. C. Emshwiller, C. Miéville. Feminism & SF.

23–26—**MediaWest*Con, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. mwc@mediawestcon.org.** Holiday Inn So. Media fanzines.

23–26—**MisCon, Box 7721, Missoula MT 59807. www.miscon.org.** Ruby's Inn. D. Gerrold, Delany, J. Blanc, C. Bordell.

24—**ReccaCon, c/o Los Modenas College, 2700 E. Leland Rd., Pittsburg CA 94565. www.reccacon.com.** Anime.

24–25—**Creation Fangoria, 1010 N. Central Ave., 4th fl., Glendale CA 91202. (818) 409-0960.** Hilton, Burbank CA.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** Freas. WorldCon. C$250+/US$170+.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $140+.

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY LEAD STORY

Kage Baker, one of our most popular and prolific authors, offers us a change of pace from her usual Company stories, taking us to a thinly settled and beleaguered semi-terraformed future Mars for a fast-paced, action-packed, and wryly amusing romp that shows us how a down-on-her-luck tavern-owner with her back against the wall and the proverbial wolves howling at her door inadvertently sets off down the very peculiar path that will transform her into "The Empress of Mars." This one is fast, funny, and hugely entertaining, so don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Nebula-winner **John Kessel** returns to the Utopian Lunar colony that was the setting for his "Stories for Men" to examine a crime in progress (but who's the victim?) "Under the Lunchbox Tree"; frequent contributor **Robert Reed** examines some enigmatic and dangerous "Hexagons"; Nebula and Hugo Award-winner **Mike Resnick** pauses in his busy schedule to assure us that "Robots Don't Cry"; **Don D'Ammassa** paints a harrowing picture of a man on a life-or-death quest who's willing to pay any price and do anything to find the "Curing Agent"; and new writer **Lee Allred**, making a poignant *Asimov's* debut, offers irrefutable proof that "Our Gunther Loves to Dig."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes us back into the dim, distant past to a time "When There Was No Internet"; **James Patrick Kelly** "On the Net" column goes searching for some "Frequent Filers" and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column muses about "Content, Consciousness, Style"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our July issue on sale at your newsstand on June 3, 2003, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, or order *Asimov's* in downloadable electronic formats, at our website, *www.asimovs.com*) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year!

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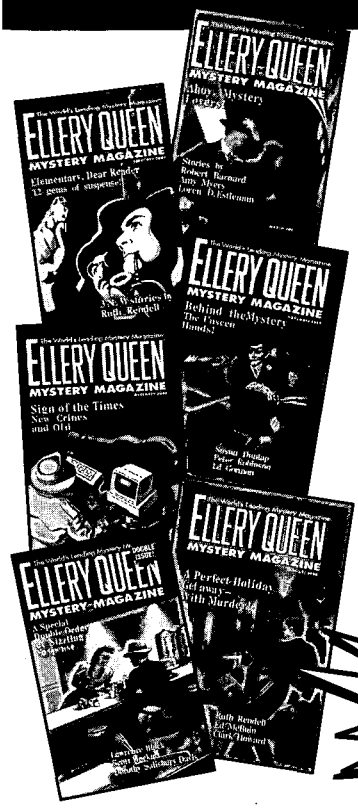

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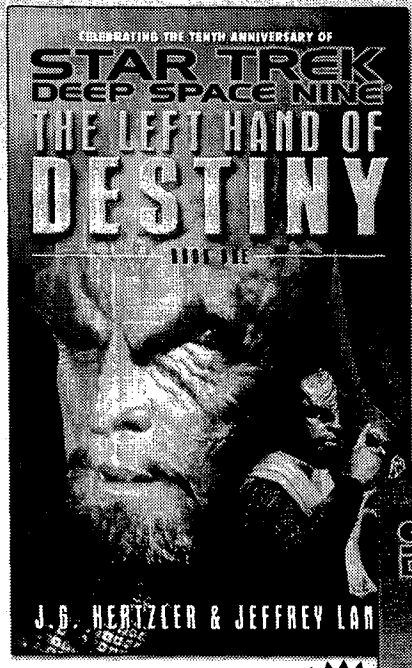

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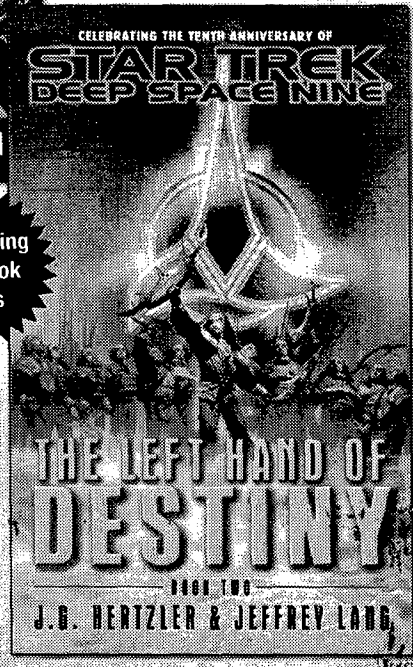

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